

STAR
WARS™



Last of the Jedi Omnibus

Volume Two

Jude Watson



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Last of the Jedi: Return of the Dark Side
Last of the Jedi: Secret Weapon
Last of the Jedi: Against the Empire
Last of the Jedi: Master of Deception
Last of the Jedi: Reckoning
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Includes

Last of the Jedi

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25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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STAR WARS. LAST ^{OF} THE JEDI

RETURN ^{OF} THE DARK SIDE
BY JUDE WATSON



NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES

Chapter One

Almost there.

Ferus Olin ran through the last check on Platform-7, the BRT droid computer that ran the capital city of Sath. It had taken over two days of constant monitoring, but most systems were back to full function. And, most important to Ferus, any information that could lead to the discovery of the identities of the Samarian resistance was gone.

Now what?

He wasn't sure what he was doing here on Samaria. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision; he'd sent off his friends to safety, but he had remained. He felt an obligation to help the Samarians straighten out their immediate problems, and make sure that the computer sabotage hadn't endangered any members of the resistance.

But this wasn't his battle. He had set his own mission—to find every Jedi who had managed to escape Imperial Order 66, who had survived the Empire's slaughter. He'd set up a secret base for them on an unmapped asteroid. But it seemed as though every time he was about to focus on his mission, he was knocked off course.

Obi-Wan would never let this happen to him. Why does it keep happening to me?

Jude Watson

It was true that since he'd started, he'd found two Jedi. He'd been through high-speed chases, a trip to the ruined Jedi Temple, and a stay in an Imperial prison. He'd been pursued by a bounty hunter and an Inquisitor. He'd been to the Outer Rim and under the crust of Coruscant. He was starting to get the feeling that surviving Jedi were few and far between.

There has to be a better way to do this.

The Emperor had offered him amnesty in exchange for fixing the computer-sabotage problem in Sath, adding almost as an afterthought that Ferus's partner and best friend might die if Ferus didn't do it. Ferus had taken the job.

And so, Ferus Olin, double agent, was born.

He wore the label uneasily. He didn't like working for the Empire, even though he was trying to undermine it at the same time. He didn't like being this close to the dark side.

Ferus felt a sudden lurch in his stomach, a feeling close to nausea. Darth Vader was near. One of the things he'd learned staying here in Imperial headquarters was that the Sith could be hard on the digestion.

The door slid open in the darkened room. Darth Vader stood in the doorway. He never entered a room unless he had to. He was a busy...man? Humanoid? Machine?

"You should be done with this by now."

Ferus spun around in his chair. "Hey, don't you ever say hello?"

"Emperor Palpatine has requested your presence."

Ferus frowned, surprised. "My presence where?"

"He is arriving at the landing platform at the Hall of Ministers in fifteen minutes. Then we are to proceed to the reception hall. Bog Divinian is receiving a tribute from the Samarian ministers of state."

"The Emperor is coming here? Why?" Palpatine rarely left Coruscant now.

"That is not for you to question. Be there." Vader stalked out.

"Nice to see you, too," Ferus muttered under his breath.

STAR WARS: Return of the Dark Side

Darth Vader was in charge of all of the Empire's operations on Samaria, which meant that he was technically Ferus's boss. Vader treated him with thinly veiled boredom or contempt, depending on his mood. Ferus wasn't insulted. He was happy not to have to pretend to be buddies.

Ferus closed the program he was running on the amazingly tweaked Platform-7 and headed out. The building he was in was part of a vast government complex, so he could walk to the ministers' hall through a series of turbolifts and connecting hallways.

Samaria was a desert planet, and Sath was its major city. In the past century, city planners had created a vast artificial bay that curved around two-thirds of the city. The most exclusive neighborhoods were spread out on a series of land extensions into the bay in a pattern of many-petaled flowers. Government buildings, as well as homes for the wealthy and the palace of the prime minister, were located here.

Ferus noted the extra buzz in the hallways. Some of the ministers, dressed in their sky-blue official robes, were also heading to the landing platform. Although there was a healthy opposition to the Empire in Sath, ministers were canny politicians. They'd curry favor with the Emperor if they had to.

But why had the Emperor asked for his presence at a purely ceremonial affair?

Ferus had let the saboteur of the Sathan computer go, but there was no way for Palpatine to know that.

Or was there?

And why was Palpatine so interested in Samaria? It was a technologically sophisticated planet, true. But Lemurtoo was a small system, with only the neighboring planet of Rosha orbiting the same sun.

The Emperor had told Ferus he wanted to help Samaria thrive...but Ferus would believe that the day he believed in space angels.

Jude Watson

Ferus hopped on the turbolift to the landing platform. He wanted to be gone. He wanted to return to the asteroid base and see his friends. But for now, he'd better stick around.

He had a feeling his work here wasn't quite done.

Chapter Two

The Legislators' private landing platform was a large one, protruding from the fiftieth floor of the Hall of Ministers. Because it was open to the sky, a cooling system was installed in the overhang in an attempt to regulate the hot, dry climate. The cool air helped, but standing out here for so long was making everyone wilt. Emperor Palpatine was late. No one dared activate the transparisteel canopy bubble, for fear of offending him.

The top ministers ringed the platform. Perched on their shoulders or attached to specially designed holsters were personal droids, all customized with different colors and jeweled insets. All Samaritans wore these small, lightweight droids, which had been developed exclusively on the planet from a prototype design from LeisureMech Industries. Each droid had a sleek design that combined the personal-servant features of a luxury droid and the hardwiring of a tech droid. They were about the size of a lightweight mouse droid. Known as Personal Droid Helpers, most Samaritans called them PDs, or the more affectionate Peteys.

Samaritans didn't use credits. Everything from their taste in tea to the fuel level in their speeders was kept track of by their PDs. All they had to do was walk into a café or fueling station and the purchase would be automatically deleted from a central account.

Jude Watson

Everything in Samarians' lives was contained in their droids, from their transit records to the boot sizes of their children.

Aaren Larker, the prime minister of Samaria, stood waiting, his aide by his side. Bog Divinian, the Imperial advisor, kept near the cooling jets, holding his arms out so that perspiration wouldn't stain his royal-blue tunic.

Across the platform, Darth Vader stood in the hot sun, a black presence that seemed to suck all the air and light into his shiny black boots and helmet. Was Vader sweltering underneath all that black plastoid and armor? Ferus got a certain amount of pleasure out of the idea.

What *was* under that helmet, anyway? There was not a trace of skin to be seen, nothing to indicate what species Darth Vader was. Humanoid, certainly. Once again Ferus wondered where Vader had come from. If only he knew that, he might hold the key to defeating Palpatine. Or not. At any rate, it would satisfy his curiosity.

At last Ferus glimpsed the flash of the Emperor's personal shuttle. Everyone followed its path as the ship glided downward and landed. Ferus could feel the relief bouncing off the ferrocrete with the heat. After this they could all get back to climate control.

The ramp extended until it touched the ground. The Emperor appeared at the top, his Red Guards behind him. Ferus couldn't see his face. His hood, as usual, covered his scarred and furrowed skin, his yellowed eyes. He held out his arms to the waiting ministers, in the odd greeting Ferus had noted he'd adopted. As though he were so busy gathering in all that worship that he couldn't be bothered to say hello. The ministers bowed in greeting.

The Emperor slowly descended. His head turned to one side, seeing Darth Vader, and then toward Ferus, who could feel the flash of the Emperor's regard. It sent a shiver through him. Ferus could never show how being around him was like being slammed

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with bad frequencies. He kept his expression neutral as his throat constricted.

Bog Divinian started forward, but the Emperor ignored him. To Ferus's surprise, the Emperor moved instead in Ferus's direction, turning his back on Vader and leaving Bog looking foolish, striding toward an empty ramp.

If this was intended to demonstrate Ferus's growing influence, Ferus could have done without it. He didn't want to be a rival to Darth Vader. He wanted to keep his head down, gather all the information he could on the Empire, and get out.

The Emperor approached him. The Red Guards stayed a discreet distance away. The ministers hesitantly moved toward the turbolifts. Darth Vader had not moved.

"Ferus Olin, you have done well," the Emperor said. "I asked you to restore Samaria to a functioning power again, and you did so."

"The saboteur escaped." The saboteur had turned out to be Astri Oddo, an old friend of Obi-Wan Kenobi's whom Ferus had known only slightly. He had let her and her son Lune escape with the help of his friends.

"Yes, but that was not your responsibility," the Emperor said with a glance at Darth Vader across the platform. "It belonged to someone else. You did what was required and you did it quickly. Your efficiency has been noted. We value efficiency in the Empire. It can be more valuable than strength."

"Or perhaps it's a necessary component of strength."

"Very true. Now," the Emperor said, turning to walk toward the turbolift, "come and walk with me. I have something to discuss with you. I'm glad you remained on the planet. It shows respect."

"Or a lack of transport," Ferus observed.

The Emperor ignored this. He wasn't one for jokes. But that didn't mean Ferus didn't derive some pleasure out of launching a few his way. One thing about the Imperials, they were a

Jude Watson

humorless bunch. “I would like your assessment of the current situation here,” Palpatine said.

Ferus clicked into a businesslike mode. “The infrastructure has been restored up to ninety-eight percent and by the end of today will be fully operational—”

“I am not talking about the infrastructure. I am not a bureaucrat. I am interested in your impressions of the situation.”

Ferus thought a moment. He knew what the Emperor was asking. “The population was unnerved by the infrastructure crash,” Ferus confided. “It left the city feeling vulnerable. Bog Divinian is exploiting the vulnerability. He’s hinting that the delegation from Rosha is behind it.”

“They are here to negotiate a trade agreement.”

“The first ever. The two planets have been technological rivals for decades. Exploiting the Samarian distrust of the Roshans isn’t a bad strategy to gain power, but it could backfire. Most Samaritans now support trade with Rosha. If they discover that Divinian is manufacturing the charges against the Roshans, the whole thing could blow up in your face. You’d have unrest here, and distrust of the Empire will grow. That would feed the resistance.”

“I could simply blame Divinian, and then remove him from office.”

“Well, that’s a strategy. But the Samaritans wouldn’t believe you. You’d have to use force to crush the planet.” *Which you don’t mind doing.*

“What about this resistance?” the Emperor asked. “They have struck a few Imperial targets and have been successful.”

“Their numbers are small,” Ferus said. He was treading on dangerous ground here. He had remained on the planet to help the resistance. He didn’t want to give the Emperor a reason to crack down, but if he minimized their strength too much, the Emperor would become suspicious.

“They seem well organized.”

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“Yes,” Ferus agreed. He had to. Both of the operations to knock out Imperial transports had been executed flawlessly. If he didn’t admit that, Palpatine would suspect his involvement.

“You know more about resistance groups than Lord Vader. He wouldn’t admit that, but it’s true,” the Emperor said. By his tone one could almost think he was musing aloud, but Ferus didn’t buy it for a minute. This whole conversation had been calculated, and Ferus had the feeling the outcome was inevitable. He began to feel nervous. Very nervous.

“Only Sath matters on Samaria,” Palpatine continued. “If resistance is crushed here, it will be eliminated planetwide. And here is where the computer system crashed. Lord Vader tells me you have not been able to restore the records of any subversives on the planet.”

“That was the saboteur’s first target, it turns out,” Ferus said. “Those records are gone forever.”

“What the galaxy doesn’t understand,” Palpatine continued, “is that resistance results in problems for a society as a whole—there is property damage, restricted movement for all, an atmosphere of fear and distrust. The best outcome for this planet is that it continues to be a prosperous, well-run society.”

“Of course.” There really were times when Ferus felt he was in the middle of a dream. This couldn’t be real. He couldn’t be walking alongside Emperor Palpatine and *agreeing* with him.

He knew he was being manipulated. He was here to play out the game. He had to seem reluctant, but he also had to seem corruptible. But it had to be a challenge, or Palpatine would suspect him.

“I want you to find the leaders of the resistance cell in Sath and bring them a message,” Palpatine went on. “I offer them amnesty, if they disband. We must maintain the peace.”

Amazing. Ferus wanted to shake his head at the sheer audacity of it. This figure of evil and destruction claimed to be carrying a message of peace.

“You forget I don’t know who the resistance is,” Ferus said.

Jude Watson

"I forget nothing," Palpatine said, a hint of sharpness in his tone. "That is a minor detail. And who better to bring them the message than one who has been granted amnesty himself?"

There it was. The inevitable trap. Ferus marveled at its cleverness, even as he winced as it bit into him. He had been given amnesty, so they'd trust him. He could reassure them of the Emperor's trustworthiness without saying a word. And then Palpatine would crush them. It might not be now, it might not even be soon, but it would be.

They were steps away from the turbolift. Darth Vader was still standing a hundred meters away, waiting. An Imperial officer stood by the turbolift, ready to activate the sensor. Ferus could see the darkening of his collar as the sweat had rolled down his neck and collected there. Palpatine was making them all wait. He was taking his time.

Palpatine stopped walking and turned to him. Ferus wished he hadn't. It was when he was staring into that ravaged face that he came closest to losing his nerve.

"You do not like to think so, but you're drawn to power," Palpatine told him, inclining his head so that his voice curled around Ferus's ear. "We are just beginning the new era. Make no judgments yet. The climb to power for any government takes some ruthlessness to ensure a just end. Things before were corrupt and breaking down. You must admit that to be true."

"Yes." But how much of that breakdown in stability was due to Palpatine's own maneuvering? Ferus didn't know. Palpatine had cleverly used the greed and corruption of the Senators—and the blindness of the Jedi—to build his power and then make his move.

"I am here to demonstrate that peace and stability in the galaxy are possible only through me." The Emperor looked over the city of Sath below them, at the artificial fingers of sand that stretched out into the aquamarine sea. "You are standing at a crossroads, Ferus Olin. You should consider where you truly belong. You flourished at the Jedi Temple. You thrived under its

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rules, its structure. What I am building is much better. A central clearing house in which the politics and stability of the galaxy are acted on by wise minds.”

Ferus didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. Palpatine was drawing him in. It was a clumsy effort. Yes, he had thrived under the rules of the Temple.

But he wasn’t that person anymore.

He wasn’t crazy about rules anymore. And he definitely didn’t like being told what to do.

He would never join the Empire, but it disturbed him that Palpatine seemed to know him intimately. When he spoke of Ferus’s life as a Jedi student, he put his finger on exactly how Ferus had experienced it. How could that be? They’d barely had contact. Anakin Skywalker had been Palpatine’s favorite, not Ferus.

“Will you do what I have asked?” Palpatine questioned.

“Yes,” Ferus said. At least the job would work with his own interest. He could contact the resistance and see what sort of help they might need.

Ferus started to move away, but Palpatine wasn’t finished.

“One more thing,” the Emperor said. “Contact me directly with your progress reports.”

Ferus nodded, trying to keep the surprise off his face. Nobody reported directly to Palpatine except Darth Vader. Ferus had assumed that Vader would be his contact; after all, Vader was in charge of all the Empire’s operations on the planet, though he came and went often. Was Palpatine hinting to Ferus that Vader was not quite the favorite he appeared to be?

The Emperor moved off toward Darth Vader, who was still waiting and had not moved a muscle. As Ferus walked toward the turbolift, he could feel Vader’s anger like a shove against his back. Ferus hopped onto the turbolift and felt the reassuring movement down toward the planet, away from the heavy Imperial presence.

Jude Watson

Another job. He'd never expected that becoming a double agent would happen so fast.

Chapter Three

As soon as Trever reached the secret base, he was ready to leave again. He kicked at the dust—the whole asteroid was just dust and rocks and darkness. Because it didn't orbit a sun, any light came from the upper atmosphere, which was colored by the constantly shifting storm. It made for complete darkness at times, and at others, a dense dark blue or purple haze.

It didn't matter if there was light or not. There was nothing to see.

The base had started with four beings: Ferus, Trever, and Toma and Raina, two resistance commanders who'd been fighting the Empire on their home planet of Acherin. Toma and Raina had hidden Garen Muln during Order 66 and given Ferus his first lead on a surviving Jedi. When Ferus had asked them to run the secret base, they had agreed without hesitation, despite the fact that they had only rudimentary supplies and no ship that could take them away if trouble arrived. They were foes of the Empire and they would work to build the base for any surviving Jedi—the Jedi they all believed in because Ferus believed in them.

Trever was beginning to have his doubts.

They had found two Jedi still alive, so that was something. Solace, who had the most awesome fighting style and the

Jude Watson

shortest temper Trever had ever seen. Somehow he'd always imagined Jedi as placid and calm, but Solace's moods ranged from grumpy to testy. Garen Muln was a renowned Jedi as well, once a friend to Obi-Wan Kenobi, but he had been so badly wounded that he was no longer capable of much Jedi action. He had even given his lightsaber to Ferus.

Now the group numbered eleven in all. Trever had arrived here with his traveling companions Solace, Oryon, and Clive Fax, and they had sprung two Imperials prisoners—Ferus's best friend, Roan Lands, and their friend Dona, as well as Astri Oddo and her six-year-old son, Lune. They were an odd group with only one thing in common—they were all wanted by the Empire.

They'd commandeered an Imperial ship, a sweet Corellian YT transport, but they'd had to ditch it at a spaceport and find something else. They'd arrived on the asteroid with Solace flying a less impressive and close-to-clunky Class Space Cruiser with a pitted hull and a stripped interior.

They'd arrived to find that conditions had deteriorated. Toma had fallen ill, and though Raina had training as a medic, she lacked the supplies needed to cure him. His recovery was slow, and he was still weak and shaky.

With Toma down, Raina had worked herself to the bone. Garen had tried to help in the greenhouse, but he was still weak, and eventually he pushed himself too far and had to stop. Raina had carried the bulk of the work on her shoulders, and she was in a state of exhaustion by the time they'd returned.

The group had taken stock of the situation and immediately went to work. Solace had barked out orders, and the situation was bad enough that even Clive had obeyed. Oryon had turned out to be a knowledgeable gardener, and he'd recalibrated the soil mix in the greenhouse. Already the plants and vegetables were showing signs of new life. Roan worked on the exterior of the survival pod, which had been buffeted by a strong wind. Clive set to work repairing the landspeeder. Dona foraged for edible plants and set up more vaporators. Astri had helped with Garen

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and Toma, as well as tweaking the comm system that Toma had managed to set up before he fell ill. Trever himself had helped wherever necessary, which meant he'd spent way too much time pulling weeds and watering in the greenhouse. That would have been bad enough, but he'd also gotten stuck with the most degrading, dirty, despicable job of all—babysitting.

He'd asked Astri if there was something she'd like him to detonate instead, but she'd just grinned and tossed him a lasertoy.

Well, Lune had turned out to be an okay kid. When Ferus had given him that look—the look Trever had come to know so well, the look that meant *do this, do it now, and don't complain*—Trever had taken the boy and escaped from the high-rise building in Sath that had been invaded by stormtroopers. He and Lune had tumbled into Solace's transport, and Astri had gathered Lune into her arms. She hadn't cried, but Trever would never forget the fierceness of her expression or the way she had clasped her son against her. It reminded him of his mother...only his mother was dead, so he didn't want to be reminded. He tried not to be around when Astri and Lune were together.

Now he sat outside in a rare moment of light. Occasionally the asteroid would travel by a star system or a sun big enough to penetrate the thick atmosphere, and they would be able to see without glowlights.

He watched as Garen helped Lune keep a ball in the air using the Force. As soon as Garen had seen Lune, he'd known the boy was Force-sensitive. Those Jedi could sure pick up on whatever that Force thing was. Garen had worked with Lune, helping him “trust his feelings” and “Don't try. Just do.” Sure. Whatever the lesson was, it was working. Trever wished he could propel an object just by looking at it. He'd propel plenty of credits his way.

The only person who wasn't tickled by the sight of Garen and Lune was Astri. He saw her watching, and he could feel her worry. Who could blame her? It wasn't exactly a stellar moment to be a Jedi.

Jude Watson

He knew that Astri's husband, Bog Divinian, had connived to get Lune away from her. He wanted to enroll Lune in some sort of academy the Empire was starting on Coruscant. He knew Lune was Force-sensitive, so he figured he'd make a hotshot pilot eventually.

Ferus had foiled that plot. But Astri kept on worrying.

Trever tucked his hands around his knees and leaned against a flat boulder. It was the end of a long day. Soon, the others would leave their jobs and gather. Someone would bring a tray with tea. They would sit and report on their progress. Trever didn't know how the routine had been established, but it had. It made them all feel part of something.

Clive arrived first, settling himself next to Trever with an *oof*. "Leave it to Ferus," he said. "If there's an unspeakably dreadful patch of rock you can land a starship on, he'll find it."

It was a variation of what he said every day. Clive was meant for cities and teeming worlds with traffic and restaurants and dangerous characters. He'd once been a double agent during the Clone Wars, as well as a musician and industrial spy. There didn't seem to be anything he couldn't do.

With another sigh, Clive stretched out full-length on the ground. His black hair was filmy with dust, and grease had settled into every crease in his tunic. He was still working on the balky landspeeder. He appeared to be in a state of utter exhaustion, but when Astri walked over and placed her folding stool next to Trever, Clive sat up.

"At least we get some light today," Astri observed. "We must be passing by a big star system."

"Great. More light to see more dust," Clive said.

"What do you expect from a hideout, Clive?" Astri asked. "Fine hotels and sunshine every day?"

"I don't see why not. I've hidden out in many a fine hotel in my day." Clive settled his head back on the rock he'd used as a pillow. "Ferus just has to make things hard. And may I point out that he isn't even here?"

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The others began to straggle toward them. Dona appeared, carrying a basket with the bread she'd managed to bake every day despite her other chores. She loved to feed them, and Toma and Garen already had grown stronger under the spell of her soups and breads. Behind her, Roan carried a small table, which he placed near Trever and the others. Dona laid the basket on it. Then she put her thick, broad hands on her back and stretched.

"A long day's work," she said. "It feels good."

A groan emerged from Clive. "If you say so, mate."

Roan gave him a nudge with his foot and dropped a thick chunk of bread on his chest. "Maybe this will revive you." Like Ferus, Roan had known Clive for years. Roan and Ferus had been partners in the firm of Olin/Lands, which had created new identities for those trying to escape criminal gangs, pirates, or governments—anyone who had crossed an evil organization and needed to hide. Clive had been more of a con man than a whistle-blower, but Ferus and Roan had liked him and helped him anyway. They'd rescued him from several scrapes and earned his loyalty. Clive claimed not to believe in anything but credits in his account, but he was loyal to his friends.

Oryon and Solace joined the group. They were the unofficial leaders. Oryon was a strong, tall Bothan who'd run a successful spy network during the Clone Wars. The Empire had put a price on his head, and he was forced to disappear, joining a group called the Erased on Coruscant. Now he sipped his tea and stood talking quietly with Solace.

"Good news," Oryon said to the others. "Astri was able to fix the comm system today. Toma's got the stormtracker working, so we were able to get a message through to Coruscant. Keets and Curran are out of danger and hiding with Dex. They're driving Dex crazy, but they're safe."

"Glad to hear that," Roan said. "Good work, Astri."

Keets Freely and Curran Caladian were other members of the Erased. They'd risked their necks by returning to Coruscant to gather information, and had almost gotten arrested. Trever was

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glad to hear they were safe. He wished he was with them, hiding in the Orange District in the sublevels of Coruscant. Sure, it was dangerous, but at least it was lively.

Dona handed Trevor a mug of hot tea. He sipped it gratefully. There were enough warming units to go around, but the chill of the asteroid settled in his bones.

Garen and Lune left their game and came over, Lune running to Astri, who spread honey on his piece of bread. Lune chomped on it happily.

The last to join them were Raina and Toma. Toma had grown a beard since his illness, and it was now streaked with gray. He moved with the careful attention of someone who had been recently ill.

Raina was carrying two stools under her arm. She put one down for Toma and motioned to Dona to take the other. She found a flat rock to perch on and accepted a mug from Astri.

Raina flipped her thick auburn braid over her shoulder. "Toma has news," she said.

They all turned to Toma. He wrapped his hands around his mug and leaned forward. "Thanks to Astri's good work," he said, nodding at her, "I've been able to contact someone I knew in the resistance on our homeworld," he said. "Has anyone ever heard of Moonstrike?"

"A moonstrike is when a satellite moon gets hit by an asteroid big enough to give it a wobble in orbit," Oryon said. "It can alter planetary tidal patterns and influence severe weather changes."

"That's what it is," Toma said. "And it is also the name of a secret organization. This contact is the head of it. Her name is Flame. She was an extremely wealthy aristocrat on Acherin when the Empire took over the government. Her family ran the biggest factories and corporations on the planet. She was able to get most of her wealth out before the Empire took over the main industries. Now she's using that wealth to fund Moonstrike. It's her idea to go from planet to planet, contacting any resistance movements. She'll use what she has to fund them and raise more

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funds through her contacts. The point is organization. We can accomplish so much more if we're in contact. She's put her personal fortune on the line."

"What does this have to do with us?" Clive asked.

"I've just learned that she's on her way to Samaria," Toma said. "This could be helpful to Ferus. Unfortunately we were cut off and I didn't get a chance to tell her about him. But a linking of resistance movements could only help any surviving Jedi. They could move about the galaxy, relying on safe havens. They wouldn't be stuck hiding out on this asteroid."

"It's a plan," Oryon said cautiously. "But the more people know about the Jedi, the more danger it puts them in."

"We have to worry about the safety of the Jedi we haven't found yet," Solace said with a glance at Garen.

"There are only three of you that I know of at the moment," Clive said. "It's not as though there's a Jedi army out there that we need to hide."

Trever looked at the others. Only a few of them knew that Obi-Wan Kenobi was still alive. It was a secret they all would keep.

Garen gave a small smile. "I'd say two and a half Jedi, actually. I'm not worth much these days."

"You are worth far more than you realize," Solace said in the gentlest tone Trever had ever heard her use.

"In any case, Ferus should be aware that Flame is there and will try to make contact with the resistance," Raina said. "Ferus is there to help them."

"One of us should go to Samaria," Oryon said.

"I'll go," Solace said.

Oryon shook his head. "You shouldn't. You're too conspicuous. You were just there, and the Empire is on the lookout for you. I'll go."

"And you're not conspicuous?" Solace asked.

"I'll go," Clive said. "I can't wait to get off this rock, anyway."

Jude Watson

“Wait a second, if anyone goes, it should be me,” Roan said. “I have the most experience with resistance movements.”

“You just escaped from an Imperial prison,” Oryon said. “You don’t have any ID docs. You can’t go.”

“I can create a false ID doc in no time.”

Toma held up a hand. “This shouldn’t be cause for argument. We need to decide on the best person.”

“I’ve done an atmospheric scan,” Roan said. “The storms will lessen in severity in five hours. A good time to take off. I say we get some rest, then decide.”

The others agreed to this. Everyone headed back to the shelters. Trever walked back slowly. He hadn’t said a word, because he knew the others would disagree.

He should be the one to go.

He was the least conspicuous. Nobody paid attention to kids. He knew resistance movements almost as well as Roan. He was a good pilot and a better fighter. He could be useful. The only reason he hadn’t stayed in the first place was that Ferus had practically kicked him off the planet.

What really bugged him was that nobody worried about Ferus. Everybody just assumed Ferus was okay. They’d left him on a half-built high-rise, hundreds of meters in the air, surrounded by stormtroopers and wicked droids that could cut through a ship’s engine in seconds—not to mention Darth Vader waiting below like some mammoth reclumi spider—and they thought because he was such a great Jedi hotshot, he’d be fine.

Well, Trever had news for all of them: Ferus wasn’t a Jedi. He had done some amazing things, no question about it. But Trever had also seen how he’d struggled. He’d seen him make mistakes.

Ferus was no match for Darth Vader.

Ferus needed help.

Trever waited until he heard only even breathing around him. He stole out of the shelter and made his way swiftly to the one transport. He sat in the pilot seat, gathering his courage. Trever had made the journey several times, and although he said he was

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used to it, the truth was that every time he had to fly through the storm, he was a little bit terrified. He was always glad when they made it through.

But he'd seen Ferus fly through this storm. Solace had just done it. He could do it, too.

He fired up the engines and shot up into the atmosphere. Once he reached the outer atmosphere, the ship immediately began to buck and almost went into a roll. Trever tasted the sourness of fear in his mouth. He righted the ship, remembering to track the currents on the computer and steer with them instead of against them. He could do this.

A trough of low pressure sent him spinning into a vortex of stars. Trever fought for control, his hands slipping from perspiration. He leaned into the ship's dive, fighting the urge to correct it. He let the ship go. With a great shudder, it straightened.

Okay, it wouldn't be easy. But he would do it. He had to.

Chapter Four

The grand reception room at the Hall of Ministers was a fifty-story lobby, a soaring structure fashioned from arching struts and slender beams. Pale-rose synthstone walls met a blue tiled floor the exact color of the artificial sea glimpsed out of the tall windows. In the center of the room was a circular platform with a repulsorlift motor.

Ferus tried to stay in the back of the crowd, but the Emperor signaled to him, and he found himself standing next to Darth Vader on the platform. Exactly where he didn't want to be.

Slowly, the platform rose in the air and hovered about a meter above the floor. Since this was a political gathering, Ferus prepared himself for one long stretch of boredom. These ceremonies could last longer than a Beshpin sunset.

He saw the delegation from Roshana at the very back of the crowd. Roshanans were tall, with four antennae as delicate as tendrils and sensitive to light, shrinking back against their heads during the day and unfurling in darkness or with anxiety. Most of them had light eyes of blue or green, and strong, flexible bodies. He was surprised they'd shown up at all, considering all the lies Bog Divinian was spreading about them. Bog had made it sound as if Larker's support of trade between the old rivals was a big mistake.

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Ferus's opinion was that Bog was a dim-witted, conniving dolt, but he had to reluctantly admit that he was clever about trying to win over the population. Bog had taken credit for fixing the computer virus that had paralyzed Sathan society, and never stopped praising the planet and its citizens. The Sathans were won over with flattery and given a reason to despise a rival, and that was an irresistible combination.

Aaren Larker, the prime minister of Samaria, gave a short speech thanking the ministers for attending. It was clear the man was pained to have to praise Bog Divinian. All he wanted to do was kick the Empire off his planet.

Ferus wondered how long Larker would last. Already there were calls for a vote of no confidence. He was sure Bog was behind the movement to remove Larker. When he'd arrived on the planet, he thought Bog was foolish to expect that he could rule Samaria. Now he saw that Bog hadn't been overconfident in the least.

"And now we come to the reason we are here," Larker said. "Due to the unanimous vote of the ministers, I would like to present the Award of the City of Sath to our Imperial advisor, Bog Divinian, who aided us so capably during the crisis. To show our appreciation, we bestow upon him this gift of his own personal droid, manufactured here on Samaria."

Ferus watched Bog's smile broaden. He probably wasn't quick-witted enough to realize that Larker had called him only "capable." That was hardly high praise.

Yet here was Bog, acknowledging the applause, smiling broadly and stepping forward. Larker handed over a personal droid, which Bog plopped on his shoulder as if he'd been doing that all his life, giving it a small pat that sent the ministers into more applause.

"You know, I always wanted one of these fellows," Bog said. "My very own Petey! I'm hoping he's going to reform me. Get me to meetings on time."

A chuckle ran through the ministers.

Jude Watson

“Better yet, maybe he’ll tell me when to take a break!”

Scattered claps and a great hoot of laughter from the ministers. Bog was working the crowd.

“But seriously...” Bog paused to let the noise die down. “I’ve only been here for a few months, but I feel like I’ve lived here all my life. You Samaritans, you work hard, you play hard, and you make things happen. Now, other planets might have a hard time with that—” Bog held up a hand as murmuring swept through the audience. It was an obvious reference to Rosha. Larker frowned and looked as though he wanted to shove Bog off the repulsorlift platform. “—but the Empire doesn’t. Some other planets might want to bring you down, make themselves feel smarter. I’ll tell you this—it’s not going to happen. Because Samaritans always win!”

Cheers rose from the ministers. Ferus couldn’t believe they were buying this. Bog was making interplanetary relations seem like a Podrace.

“And that’s why—” Another pat for the personal droid on his shoulder. “—I’m proud to be an honorary Samaritan!”

The hall went wild. The ministers pushed forward as the platform lowered, all anxious to shake Bog’s hand. The HoloNet cameras zoomed in as reporters began to talk excitedly about Bog.

Ferus saw Vader move closer to the Emperor. Using his old Jedi training, he screened out the noise around him and honed in on only two voices.

“He was promoted beyond his competence, we thought,” Palpatine said. “But look at him.”

“He is a fool,” Darth Vader said.

“Yes,” Palpatine admitted. “He is exactly what we need.”

Ferus milled among the crowd, trying to pick up what the mood was. It was apparent that the ministers had been swept along in the tide of Bog’s self-regard. Bog’s speech had moved

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through the city like wildfire, and the HoloNet on the planet was rebroadcasting it to cheers at every gathering place in Sath.

He noted how the ministers flocked around Bog but left the prime minister of Samaria by himself. Ferus moved toward him. He had been waiting for days to get Larker alone.

“Do you hear them?” Larker said to him. “They are transferring their loyalty to an Imperial advisor. Which I suppose makes you happy.”

“Not particularly.”

“You’re one of them.”

“No. I did a job for them. There’s a difference.”

Larker gave him a long look. “Keep telling yourself that,” he said softly.

“I know that you hired Astri Oddo to sabotage the computers,” Ferus said quietly. “I arranged for her escape. She must have contacted you.”

“She did.”

“Then you know you can trust me.”

Larker’s gaze roamed the crowd. “I can’t trust anyone.”

“If Bog continues to whip the city into a frenzy about the Roshan threat, you can step forward and admit it was you who gave the order to sabotage the computers, not the Roshans.”

“And if I do that, I’ll be arrested, and Bog will become governor,” Larker said.

“You might not have a choice,” Ferus said. “Bog is lining up support among the ministers to oust you.”

“They won’t betray me, in the end,” Larker said. “I’ve been working on establishing this agreement with the Roshans for years. The ministers all support it. The time to keep industrial secrets is over. We are each technological innovators, but if we work together we can make even bigger strides. We are experts in macrotechnology—we can run cities, planets with our systems. They have made enormous strides in microtechnology. Their droids are among the smallest in the galaxy, with the most sophisticated systems. We had a setback when Rosha sided with

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the Separatists during the Clone Wars. They were deeply involved with the Trade Federation. But they've come to regret it. Now we can achieve a real trade agreement. We can share our technology."

"Not if the Empire has anything to say about it."

"They don't. They don't interfere in systemwide trade agreements. They don't want the galactic economy to crash."

"No, they just want to control it. Why do you think Bog is so against the trade agreement?"

Larker shrugged. "Because I support it. That's reason enough. He knows that the average Samarian fears the Roshans, so he'll use it as a wedge to gain support." He gave Ferus a searching look. "You say you're just a contract worker, working for credits. You know something about me that could bring me down, yet you don't use it. Why?"

"Because I'm on your side. And I could use your help. The Emperor has asked me to find the resistance and offer them amnesty if they disband."

Larker looked at him sharply. "And you expect them to do this?"

"No. But I was hired to deliver the message personally. If I can find them and talk to them, I might be able to help them. I was one of the founding members of the resistance on Bellassa. We struck many blows against the Empire after it took over the government. The city rose against them."

"But the Empire is still in control."

"You can't kick the Empire off your planet. You can only make it hard for them to control you. And you wait for better opportunities."

"So," Larker said, "you were one of the founders of the Eleven, and yet here you are. Were you offered amnesty by the Emperor, too?"

"Yes."

Larker looked at him with contempt. "So you took it and abandoned your cause."

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“Not exactly,” Ferus said. He couldn’t explain fully. It would compromise his mission. “I am still working for the cause, but...in a different way.”

But it was too late. He’d lost Larker.

“I can’t help you,” Larker said. “I don’t know anything about the resistance, anyway.”

Just then the assistant who’d been lurking nearby approached. Larker seized on the interruption. “Yes, Dahl?”

“The Roshan delegation would like to speak with you. Robbyn Sark especially is anxious to go over some details of the agreement.”

“Of course.” Larker nodded at Ferus and started across the crowded floor. Ferus watched as he said a few words into the aide’s ear. Dahl nodded.

A shadow fell across the tiles, and Darth Vader appeared next to Ferus.

“You had a long conversation,” Vader calmly observed.

“He’s a chatty guy.”

“Do not forget who you are working for. Larker is not to be trusted.”

“The way I see it, nobody is to be trusted around here. But thanks for the warning.”

“The Emperor gave you an assignment. I expect a full briefing.”

“You can expect it, but you won’t be getting it.” Ferus was beginning to enjoy himself. “The Emperor’s instruction was to report to him directly on my progress. No one else. And that would include you.”

Vader said nothing for a moment. Ferus only heard the rasp of his automated, eerie breathing.

Then Darth Vader abruptly turned and strode away. His meaning was all too clear to Ferus: *I’m going to enjoy destroying you.*

Chapter Five

Oops. Ferus had tried to keep out of Vader's way. He really had. But apparently he hadn't succeeded.

Ferus waited outside the Hall of Ministers. He rested against the platform of a large sculpture, slabs of stone and chunks of plastoid and quadrillum that were supposed to represent a gigantic version of a droid's sensor suite. More than anything, the Samaritans worshipped technology. He didn't think much of the sculpture, but it hid him from notice and gave him a clear view of the huge double doors of the exit.

After only a moment or two, Larker's aide, Dahl, walked out the door and briskly through the front gates. Air taxis patrolled this area of Sath, busily whisking ministers from one government building to another. Dahl activated the blinking search signal on his personal droid, the method Sathans used to hail air taxis. A vehicle pulled up immediately.

Ferus hailed his own taxi the old-fashioned way—he held up his hand.

His driver followed the taxi in front without a question. The taxi ahead soared through the traffic lanes in no hurry and with no attempt to lose a tail. Obviously Dahl had no idea he was being followed and took no precautions. That was odd. Perhaps Ferus had read the situation wrong. He had assumed that Dahl

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was Larker's liaison to the resistance, but if that were so, Ferus would have expected him to take evasive action routinely.

The air taxi stopped at a café and Dahl hopped out.

Well. Ferus would either get a lead on the resistance, or lunch.

Ferus had his own taxi pull up a block ahead. He followed the ramp back to the café. He tracked Dahl as he moved through the crowd. Dahl headed toward the back, where Sathans were ordering food and drinks at a service bar. Keeping out of sight in case Dahl looked back, Ferus drifted off to the right. Dahl joined the line.

Suddenly a young woman behind Ferus stepped back into a waiter, who dropped the tray full of empty glasses he was holding. The glasses crashed to the floor. Ferus quickly melted back in case Dahl turned, as everyone else in the café did.

But Dahl didn't turn. He slipped through the crowd and disappeared.

Swiftly Ferus turned back and headed for the front entrance. He had no doubt that Dahl had gone out a back exit.

A classic move. Use the distraction to lose the tail, if it was there. Dahl was just being careful. Ferus exited, making sure there was no one behind him. He turned down a side street and Force-leaped up to the roof of the building, landing without a sound. He ran lightly across the roof. Looking down, he could see Dahl quickly heading down a back street, checking behind him to make sure no one was there.

Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, Ferus was able to keep Dahl in sight as he moved through the climate-controlled walkways that crisscrossed all the city levels in Sath. At last he turned into a Speeder Exchange, a large lot where used airspeeders were for sale. Dahl moved from one speeder to the next, appearing to consider them.

Ferus leaped down into an alley that connected to the lot. From here he had a perfect vantage point.

A salesman drifted over, but Dahl shook his head and walked away. Dahl slipped into a yellow speeder, checking out the

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controls casually. Then he jumped out again, checked out a few more speeders, and left.

Ferus had seen what he'd come to see. He'd just witnessed a drop. He let Dahl disappear down the street. He waited.

In another moment, the curly-haired young woman who'd caused the distraction at the café entered the lot. She smiled at the salesman, walked through the lot examining different vehicles, and climbed into the yellow speeder. She put her hands on the controls and examined the dashboard.

She got out, shrugged at the salesman, waved, and continued down the street. Her personal droid was a metallic red, and her tunic was snug-fitting and reached down to her black boots. She was dressed as a typical stylish young Sathan.

And she was in the resistance.

Ferus followed her by the same method, leaping from roof to roof and occasionally, if there were good sight lines, from the walkway one level above. He was good at this. Skills he had learned as a Jedi had been honed as he worked in his own business, and later as a member of the resistance on Bellassa.

The woman entered a small cantina. Ferus waited a few minutes, then strolled inside. The woman sat at a table in the back. An older man had joined her. Ferus took a seat at the bar.

He considered his next move. The most direct was most likely best. He would just approach them.

He was about to get up when he felt something small and cold nudge him in the back.

"Yeah, it's a blaster," a deep voice said. "So don't make a move. I'd like a word with you in the alley."

Chapter Six

Trever had thought he could handle just about anything the galaxy could throw at him at this point, but he'd barely made it through the storm, and the ship was failing as it approached Samaria. He had the coordinates where Flame would be—thanks to a quick search of Toma's private database—but he had about two more minutes before he lost his engines and crashed.

Maybe it hadn't been the brightest idea to take off like that.

Well. At this point he had nothing to lose. He'd either be space dust or he'd succeed in landing and finding Flame...and Ferus. Trever gritted his teeth and kept his hands on the sweat-slicked controls. The craft was a bit out of control now. His plan was to come in fast and hug the ground in the hopes of evading any Imperial tracking sensors. Technically, Trever was supposed to check in and land at the main landing platform in Sath, but rules made him itchy, and Imperials made him break out in hives.

When he hadn't been worrying on the journey, he'd been checking out the nav database. The area he was supposed to land in lay outside Sath. Samaria had vast areas of wilderness, and the Crystal Forest was one of them. Although it was a popular destination for tourists and campers, much of it was still wild.

The Crystal Forest had formed millions of years before, when the planet was an ice planet. Crystals had formed cliffs and

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treelike shapes that towered hundreds of meters high. It was supposed to be an inspiring sight, but all Trever cared about was that it would provide good cover.

Suddenly, as Trever gripped the controls of the failing ship, he saw the area below. It looked like a red haze at first, but as he approached he was able to differentiate the gnarled massive forms in tones of rust and orange and gold that rose from the planet's surface. It was oddly and eerily beautiful.

The ship shuddered and groaned, then heeled to starboard. Trever had to push the failing engines to avoid slamming into one of the towering shapes. Now he was in the thick of it, the ship with its screaming engines lurching and stalling as he desperately looked for somewhere to land.

This place had seemed so galactically cool from the relative safety of the atmosphere. But the treelike forms weren't so cool when you were heading straight toward them. This place had its own weather system, too. Winds howled through the canyons created by the formations, slammed against the ship, and caused Trever to scream out loud when metal shrieked from the impact of a sharp crystal scraping along the side.

He had to bring the ship down. He had to do it or he would die.

Desperately searching now, Trever descended. One wing of the ship bashed into a crystal formation, and more red lights suddenly blinked insistently on the control panel.

"Just hold on," Trever muttered.

Coming up fast on his right, he saw a small clear space on the surface. He remembered a trick of Ferus's. He cut the engines, turned hard right, crossed his fingers, let out a howl of desperation, and held on as the ship shuddered, creaked, and then dropped like a stone into the opening.

Trever felt his body fly up with the impact. His teeth slammed into his lower lip. He heard a horrible tearing noise and the ship made a quarter turn, then stopped. With a gasp, the engines died.

Trever, however, was still alive. He thought.

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It took him several minutes to be able to move. His body shook from the effort it took. With trembling fingers he dabbed at the blood on his lip with the hem of his tunic.

“Get a grip. You’re safe.” He said the words out loud. He was embarrassed that he’d been in such a state of terror. He’d been through a lot in the past month or so with Ferus. He’d thought he was brave. He’d never realized how much of his bravery he had borrowed from Ferus.

He raised himself from the chair and looked around. The ship had basically collapsed around him. The cockpit was intact, but he could have trouble exiting if the ramp didn’t work.

He pressed the release. To his relief, it squeaked open. It didn’t slide all the way down, but that wasn’t a problem. He wiggled to the top and jumped. The forest floor was like transparisteel, smooth and cold.

Flame had given Toma the coordinates where she would land and said she’d wait there for at least two hours, in hopes that Toma could send someone to meet her. The two hours were up about a half hour ago, but Trever hoped she hadn’t given up yet. He got his bearings on his datapad map and struck out for the coordinates.

Although the surface temp readout on the ship had prepared him for heat, the hard crystal formations and the forest floor radiated coolness into the air. Trever kept up a good pace. The place was quiet. No forest creatures could live in this environment; there was no vegetation, no water. Trever hoped he’d bump into Flame soon. This place was starting to spook him out.

Suddenly the quiet was broken by a soft whirring he recognized as a speeder engine. Trever wanted to rush forward but he had learned caution on Bellassa. He slipped behind one of the formations and waited.

Two airspeeders zoomed out from between the formations. Imperial stormtroopers, four in each vehicle. He could tell they were tracking someone. They made a hard right and streaked off.

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After another moment he heard another speeder. He flattened himself against the crystal, feeling the points against his back.

The silver speeder flew by, going at top speed. He had only a flash of an impression, a figure in a black flight suit with a shiny black helmet.

It had to be Flame.

Trever had to take the chance. He stepped out from behind the crystal formation and tried to signal the speeder with the glowlight from his utility belt.

He was too late. The speeder took a sharp turn around a gnarled crystal ten meters wide and disappeared.

Trever sprang back toward the rock, but the Imperial speeders had circled back and he was too late. He made a dash for cover, but one of the Imperial speeders peeled off—and came straight for him.

He'd been spotted.

Chapter Seven

Ferus faced the alley wall. The blaster was held right at the tender part of his neck, and his companion wasn't shy about pressing the barrel hard into his flesh.

"Do you think we're stupid?" his assailant asked.

"Who's we?"

The barrel was pushed even deeper. Ferus tried not to wince. He was getting annoyed. He knew he could disarm whoever it was behind him in seconds, but he also knew that aggression at this point wouldn't get him what he wanted.

"Do you think we're stupid?" the assailant repeated.

"No. I don't think you're stupid. A little short on manners, maybe. But if I thought you were stupid, I wouldn't be here trying to find you."

"So you admit you're trying to find us." The barrel angled toward Ferus's head. "You are an agent of the Empire."

"Well," Ferus said, "technically, that's true. I guess that sounds bad. But it doesn't mean I can't help you."

The assailant gave an incredulous laugh. "I should just shoot you now."

"But then you wouldn't find out what I came to say. Why don't you hear me out, and then shoot me if you want to?"

"Because I don't have time to waste."

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Ferus could feel that despite his tough talk, his assailant didn't want to shoot him. He wasn't dealing with a hardened killer.

"Look, this might go easier if I introduced myself."

"I know who you are. Ferus Olin."

"I was one of the founding members of the Eleven on Bellassa."

"I've heard of Ferus Olin. But I've never seen him."

"So you think I'm an impostor?"

"I think the Empire is capable of anything. I was warned about you."

"By Dahl. Larker's aide. I saw the drop."

He heard his assailant suck in air through his teeth. "Larker only helps us from time to time. He's not one of us. And he doesn't know Bellassa like I do. The real Ferus Olin could be trusted. The real Ferus Olin wouldn't work for the Emperor."

"Things change. Listen, I'm just a contract employee. Think about it. What better way to find out how the Empire works than by working for them?"

"Are you saying you're a double agent?"

"Now you're catching on."

There was a pause. "What's the location of the safehouse of the Eleven?"

"Aw, c'mon. That's a stupid test."

The barrel pressed into his flesh again.

"Okay, okay, not stupid...uh, not helpful? You know I can't tell you that, even with a blaster at my head. Ask me something else."

"What was the first job the Eleven did together?"

Ferus thought about this. He knew the answer. The Eleven—back when there really were only eleven members—had broken into Imperial files and discovered the names of the Imperial spies who had infiltrated the capital city of Ussa. The raid was still a secret kept by the original group, because jobs were never discussed unless they had to be. If his assailant knew someone on the inside who had told him, Ferus could corroborate the

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information. It didn't matter, at this point—the Imperial spies had long ago been rotated to other assignments.

“A raid on the Imperial files at the garrison headquarters to discover the names of Imperial spies.”

“How many spies did you discover?”

“Four.”

The pressure on his head lessened. “You can turn around.”

Ferus turned. His assailant was younger than he'd thought, maybe a few years older than Trever. His deep, gritty voice rose from a thick, muscular chest. Thick brown hair brushed the collar of his tunic. He still held the blaster.

“How did you know that was the truth?” Ferus asked.

“I knew someone who was close to the group,” he said. “When we started the resistance here, I went to Ussa and a few other planets to see if I could study a successful operation. I was able to get some strategy tips. Someone was kind enough to brief me on the first job.”

“Dr. Amie Antin,” Ferus said. “That's who you know.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you said your contact was close to the group, but not in the group. Amie wasn't at that time. But she treated Wil after the raid—he had a small fracture in his wrist. So she knew about it.”

“Good deduction. I'm Dinko, by the way. Code name. We all use them—it's better if we don't know anyone's real name.” The young man grinned, transforming his features from forbidding to welcoming. “I guess I should say welcome to the Samarian resistance.”

Ferus rubbed his neck. “You sure know how to make a guy feel welcome.”

Suddenly the grin on Dinko's face faded. “I haven't heard from Amie in several weeks. We were in close contact. Do you know anything?”

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"They had to move the base of operations after Roan was arrested. There was a crackdown. I hear they had to disband for a time."

"We don't want what happened there to happen here, that's for sure," Dinko said. "Come on, meet the others."

Ferus followed him back into the cantina. Dinko walked directly to the table with the curly-haired young woman and the older man. "This is Nek and Firefolk," he said.

He turned to the ethereal young woman with the reddish curls. "I think I've met Firefolk before," he said.

She grinned. "Try again. I'm Nek."

"I'm Firefolk," the man with the silver hair said.

"Sorry." Ferus was amused at the idea of the sweet-faced young woman taking one of the more hideous species in the galaxy, the nek battle dog, as her code name. He would have guessed she would have chosen the more fanciful Firefolk—tiny, glowing beings native to the forest moon of Endor. He sat down.

"First let me tell you why I'm officially here," he said. "Emperor Palpatine has an offer on the table. He will grant you amnesty if you disband."

"This is good news," the silver-haired Firefolk said. "It means we're getting to them."

"The Emperor offered me amnesty, and I took it," Ferus said. "It was a way to get inside. It's something to consider."

"It's a way to get arrested," Dinko said. "I don't trust it."

"You shouldn't," Ferus said.

"All right, you passed along the message," Firefolk said. "We refuse. Now, let's move on."

"Ferus wants to help us," Dinko said.

"So far the Empire hasn't taken over your government," Ferus said. "I think it's because the Emperor is still trying to consolidate power, and he doesn't want to give any other planets a reason to resent him. He's going to try to influence governments, not take them over. Willing governments will get governors. I've seen it happen on some of the Core Worlds."

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When the Empire tried to install a governor on Bellassa, we revolted, and that's when they came in with a battalion and took over. You don't want that to happen."

"So that's why they sent Divinian here," Dinko said. "They call him an advisor, but he's trying to get elected."

Ferus nodded. "Samaritans don't exclude outlanders from becoming prime minister, so he has a way in. Bog is gaining power. It will be a good thing for the Imperials if he's actually elected. They can use him to point out to other planets that they mean no harm."

"And meanwhile, the Sathans just let it happen," Dinko said darkly. "We're going to let our enemy walk right in. We'll even pull up a chair for him."

"The population is afraid," Firefolk said. "Afraid of losing what we have."

"As long as someone promises they'll keep their personal droids and their comfortable life, they'll believe anything," Nek added.

"I'm afraid Bog is winning this game," Ferus said. "He's mustered up the support to call for a vote of no-confidence for Larker."

"He's bribing the ministers," Nek said.

"If you had proof of that, it could be helpful," Ferus said. "The Emperor is still concerned with appearances. He might recall Bog back to Coruscant. But at the very least, it would expose what he's doing and he'd lose support here."

Nek, Firefolk, and Dinko exchanged glances.

"We could get the proof," Dinko said. "If all goes well."

"How?"

"Do you know that the ministers gave Bog a gift of a personal droid?"

"I was at the ceremony."

"An operative working for us programmed Bog's PD. He placed a chip in it that allows us to monitor his communications. We expect to have the proof, possibly within hours, maybe in a

Jude Watson

day...but we're sure we'll have it. That droid will record every communication, every transaction that Bog makes."

"Good. Bog isn't your only problem, but he's the biggest one at the moment. It will take the Empire awhile to replace him. In the meantime, Larker can consolidate his power and you can recruit more members."

"If we get rid of Bog, it will convince Sathans that we're worth joining," Dinko said.

"I'll report back to the Emperor that you're considering his offer," Ferus said. "In the meantime, it would be helpful if I could bring him something that will convince him I'm on his side. Do you have a drop you don't use anymore that I can tell him about?"

"How about the speeder place?" Nek suggested. "We've used it for a month now. It's time to find a new place for a drop."

"Good." Ferus stood. "How can I contact you again?"

"Do you know the Twilight Fountain on Talo Square?"

Ferus nodded. He had committed most of Sath to memory by now.

"If you go there at midday, we'll contact you. Otherwise in case of emergency we can use comlinks. We have to keep messages short in case the Empire is monitoring," Dinko said.

"Good policy." Ferus nodded a good-bye.

He walked out, feeling a strange reluctance to leave. It wasn't only that this group reminded him of his time with the Eleven. It was a feeling that they were in danger, becoming involved in something so big that they couldn't possibly win.

He'd heard the Emperor's words. Palpatine spoke of letting the planet govern itself—but if Bog failed to take over, would the Empire just call in troops for an invasion? He didn't know.

He just hoped that whatever the Empire was planning, the resistance could survive it.

Chapter Eight

The situation on Samaria was not unmanageable, Darth Vader thought. It wasn't even terribly difficult. Even that fool, Bog Divinian, was managing to manipulate popular opinion. Taking over the planet would be as easy as slicing through durasteel with a lightsaber.

So if things were under control, why was he still here? He had a galaxy to manage. Even while he'd been here, reports continued to flow in from other planets. There were plenty of matters he had to keep a hand in. Some could be handled easily with a threat or a directive. Others merited a personal visit. But his Master wanted him here, for now.

In just a few days, he'd brought the military chief in line. The battalion was secretly orbiting the Lemurtoo system, ready to be called in on a moment's notice. The captain of the battalion had drawn up a plan to guard the spaceport and station troops around the city. He was agitating to move in. Vader had quickly vetoed that ridiculous plan. It was just an attempt from a lesser military mind to thrust himself into importance. He'd ordered the battalion to stay hidden until they were needed. If they had to stage a coup, they would, but it would be done quickly. Stationing troops without needing to was foolish. It just fanned the flames of resistance.

Jude Watson

So what was bothering him? Vader turned to survey the government buildings that rose out of the petaled extensions of land that the Sathans had constructed in an aquamarine sea. He knew what was bothering him, he just didn't want to name it.

Ferus Olin.

Reporting directly to the Emperor.

Why hadn't Olin left after restoring Platform-7? He'd been given amnesty. He could have taken off. Yet he'd stayed. And when the Emperor had arrived, he had singled Olin out.

Darth Vader wasn't about to succumb to petty jealousy. Those emotions were gone forever, as foreign to him as love. He had felt love once. He had failed at it. So he had turned his mind and his power to other things. What remained had distilled down to a pureness he relished. Duty. A job to fulfill. Power to grab and consolidate and protect, and a Master to serve.

It was like this body armor he wore, this life-sustaining suit. In the beginning, he'd felt trapped by it. But he'd learned to use it for both intimidation and isolation. It allowed him to feel separate from all the beings around him, and that turned out to be very useful.

Do you see me now, Obi-Wan? I'm not connecting to the Living Force. I am looking at it from a distance. It can't touch me now.

You were wrong, my old Master. I don't need to connect to it. I just need to control it.

Vader turned away from the sight of the sea. He pushed away the thought of his former Master, as he always did. Thoughts and memories of the past came less frequently now.

Until Ferus Olin had shown up.

Jealousy wasn't an option for him anymore, but analysis was. He was adept at manipulation, at figuring out motives, of thinking ten steps ahead of anyone else. But Olin...he couldn't figure him out. If he was a double agent, he was a fool. He wasn't going to learn anything. He wasn't going to make a difference.

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Could he truly be half fascinated by the power he saw? Could he be turned to the dark side? That's what his Master thought. That could be the only reason his Master was taking an interest.

Could his Master be right? The dark side could be seductive for a Jedi. Vader knew that.

If it were so, he would have to take steps to eliminate Ferus Olin here, now. He couldn't allow Ferus Olin to flourish in the Empire. It wasn't ambition talking—Vader left ambition to fools like the captain of the battalion here—it was efficiency. He couldn't do his job if Olin were around, trying to replace him. It would just be tiresome. And annoying.

He activated the comlink to access the security guard at the main entrance of the Imperial headquarters. They'd taken over a bloc of government offices near the Hall of Ministers. "Has Ferus Olin returned?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes ago, Lord Vader."

"Send him to me."

Ferus appeared in less than a minute. Vader was surprised he didn't make him wait, just to show him that he could. But then again, Ferus didn't play those tiresome games that Bog Divinian relished.

"You wanted to see me, chief?"

Vader despised his flippancy. So unlike the way he'd been when they'd been Padawans together. One day Olin would find himself at the end of a lightsaber. Vader was looking forward to that moment.

"I want a report on the resistance."

Ferus frowned. "I guess you forgot—I don't report to you. It's okay, I know you've got a lot on your mind—all that resistance to crush. If that's all, I'll—"

"I am not interested in whatever the Emperor asked you to do. Give me the report."

Ferus lounged against the wall and crossed his arms. "You know that you're the big mystery among the Emperor's staff. Everyone wants to know who you are. Where you came from.

Jude Watson

How did you get involved with the Emperor? One day you weren't there. The next day you were."

Vader found it extremely vexing that Ferus wasn't afraid of him. He was used to feeling fear from those who were in his presence. Once, he had felt it from Ferus Olin. Olin had tumbled out from his hiding place in the Temple, looked up at Vader, and he'd almost laughed at the fear coming off him in waves. Olin had taken off like a frightened womp rat. Vader could have—*should* have—killed him then. But he'd let him go. He was more interested in embarrassing Malorum, the Inquisitor, than killing Olin. Let Malorum try to handle the intruder. He hadn't expected that with all those prowler droids and stormtroopers at his disposal, Malorum would be incompetent enough to fail.

Now Ferus Olin had the protection of the Emperor. He couldn't touch him. Yet.

Extremely trying.

He could so easily use the dark side of the Force, send Ferus's body flying through the air and slam it hard against the wall. Watch Olin break. But he couldn't. Palpatine had told him to keep his hands off.

"Not sharing today? Oh well. Maybe when we get to know each other a little better."

"I know you," Darth Vader said.

He said the words contemptuously, but Ferus picked up something behind his tone.

"You know me?"

Vader never second-guessed himself now. He so rarely made a mistake. He had reacted to the Ferus Olin he'd known. The obtuse, thick-headed, pompous Padawan. He had to remind himself that Olin must have changed. Ferus was quicker now, smarter.

Vader turned away. "I know what you are. I know what you want. You are transparent. Go."

He was surprised when Ferus didn't come back with a quip. He just went away.

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I know you.

Why did those words freeze him in his tracks?

Ferus thought back on the way Vader had spoken. There was no special emphasis in his tone; it was the same deep, expressionless disembodied voice that issued from a breath mask.

Or was it? What was it that he'd caught? An emotion, a feeling, a taunt?

Something.

And whatever it was, it had struck the same chord in Ferus.

I know you.

He knew Vader, too.

He stopped in the hallway, stockstill with the shock of it. It washed over him, the possibility—and along with that, the searing knowledge of his own stupidity.

He had assumed Vader had sprung up from nowhere because Palpatine had wanted it that way. He had assumed that Vader had been like Darth Maul, an apprentice trained and kept concealed until he was needed.

He had never considered the possibility that Vader hadn't been concealed.

That Vader had, instead, been *turned*.

That Vader could be—incredibly, tragically, *unbelievably*—a former Jedi.

I know you.

Could it be? Ferus turned and looked back at Vader's closed door. His eyes burned. He had known so many Jedi, crossed paths with so many. Hundreds. And he was known to many. He had been Siri Tachi's apprentice, and all Jedi knew Siri Tachi.

He stared at the closed door, wondering at the presence behind it.

Who are you?

Chapter Nine

Trever used his liquid cable as a lifeline. He made it to the top of the crystal formation—barely. What he wouldn't give for a little Force ability, a little boost to his jumps. Because at this rate, he wasn't getting away from these guys, and the chase had been going on for far too long.

At least they aren't shooting at me.

Suddenly, a large hunk of crystal next to him fused into white heat and disappeared.

Uh, scratch that.

Trever ducked and jumped onto the next formation. He had about three more jumps until he ran out of formations and into thin air. Now the crystals he'd admired from the air turned into sharp needlelike edges that scraped his palms and knees and made it impossible for him to get firm footing.

Far below he saw the mystery speeder close to the crystal forest floor, zigzagging through formations while the Imperial speeder tried to keep up. As he watched, the Imperial speeder lost control of a tight turn and slammed into a rough crystal mountain. The speeder skidded along the ground, spun around, and came to a stop.

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Trever leaped to the next formation, avoiding the blaster fire that pinged and blasted through the branch where he'd been standing just a moment before.

The other Imperial speeder made a tight turn and came back at him. He leaped again.

He was now officially out of room. He could use his liquid cable again, but there was nowhere to go.

Then he saw the mystery speeder zoom upward. It maneuvered directly below him. The cockpit canopy slid back.

It was a very long drop.

He leaped.

He landed awkwardly, one leg out of the speeder, but the pilot made a hard starboard turn with one hand and yanked him inside with the other, stabbed at the canopy control, and went into a screeching dive, all while Trever was trying to catch his breath.

"Try to hang on." The voice came from inside the helmet. He couldn't see the driver's face. The fingers on the controls were delicate and soft-looking, but within ten seconds Trever realized he was in the hands of an amazing pilot.

The speeder was pushed to maximum as they screamed around formations, squeezed through branchlike forms, zoomed up and back down into canyons. It was like being in one of the Podraces Ferus had told him about, the highly illegal ones that were held on Outer Rim planets.

They lost the pursuing Imperial airspeeder. The pilot slowed down, and Trever told his tripping heart to slow down, too.

"That was one galactic ride," he said, nearly out of breath.

The pilot headed into a deep, narrow canyon and snaked the vehicle around the trunk formations of crystals. Trever saw a sleek ship with a red body and a chromium hull pulled up under an overhang. They stopped there.

He got out, his legs still shaky. The pilot leaped off the speeder and removed the helmet, shaking out shoulder-length dark hair. She was a petite human woman of middle years, with piercing green eyes that matched the crystals around them.

Jude Watson

“You’re Flame, aren’t you?” Trever asked.

“Who wants to know?”

“Your contact,” Trever said. “Toma sent me.”

Her gaze ticked up and down, from his boots to the top of his head. “Aren’t you a little young?”

Annoyed, Trever ignored the comment. “I’m Trever Flume. I started in the resistance on Bellassa.”

She popped a water canister and took a swallow, tossing another one to him. “How’d you hook up with Toma?”

“We share the same hideout. I’ve got an Imperial death mark on my head.” Trever tried not to sound like he was boasting, just stating a fact. He wanted this woman to know that he was someone to be reckoned with. “I’ve been traveling with Ferus Olin.”

She looked interested for the first time. “I’ve been trying to find Ferus Olin. He was a hero of the resistance on Bellassa. Then he disappeared.”

“Toma said you’re trying to network the resistance movements in the Core Worlds.”

“It’s a start. We’re not going to get anywhere if we’re not organized.” Flame sat astride a crystal formation that formed a sort of bench. “I’ve learned one thing in my life—great wealth makes things happen. If we can fund resistance movements through one central organization, we can make progress. All it takes is wealth. Wealth creates opportunity. Simple.”

“Toma said you were one of the wealthiest citizens on Acherin.”

She smiled. “I was loaded. Now I’ve got quite a bit stashed here and there, and I’m looking for more investors. It’s not only freedom fighters who hate the Empire. There are some very rich businesspeople who fear their businesses being taken over. You can’t sell goods in a galaxy ruled by fear.”

“So are you in this for justice, or so you can create more wealth for yourself and your friends?” Trever asked.

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“What’s the matter with both? I’m a realist, not a dreamer. Most beings aren’t idealists. Most want to know what’s in it for them.”

“You’re speaking my language,” Trever said admiringly.

“So, can you hook me up with Ferus Olin?”

“That’s why I’m here. Toma thought we might be able to help each other.”

She tossed the empty water canister into the speeder. “What’s his deal? What’s he trying to do?”

Trever wasn’t about to spill the beans on the secret Jedi base. “Since I’ve been with him, he’s been basically trying to escape from Imperial jails,” he said. “You’ll have to ask him that question.”

“I have another mission here,” Flame said. “I’ve got an idea that can help the resistance. What makes Samaria unique? And I don’t mean this place,” she said, waving a hand at the crystal formations around her. “Personal droids. Everyone has them—including the Imperial advisor. They gave him one to thank him for saving the city.”

“He didn’t save the city,” Trever said. “He just took the credit.”

“Doesn’t matter. If he’s got a personal droid, that means it’s tracked his every move for the past two days. Listened in on every conversation. If we could get our hands on that droid....”

“We might learn something.”

“And it will be a way to show the resistance that I mean business. Stealing it won’t be easy, though.”

Trever grinned. “It will be for me.”

Chapter Ten

Ferus was put through to the Emperor immediately. The hologram floated in front of him, full-size. Palpatine's hood was drawn over his head, and Ferus could only see a trace of the yellowish skin, the slash of a mouth.

"I have located the resistance and delivered your message."

"Excellent."

"They will consider your offer."

"Will they accept?"

Ferus was expecting this question. He thought the chance was zero, but he had to keep Palpatine happy and Vader away. "I think there is a slim chance," he said. "They are disheartened because the majority of Samaritans don't support resistance. So they feel isolated. I don't get the sense that there are very many of them. They don't trust me, of course."

"Continue to monitor the situation. Did you gain any information that would be helpful to Lord Vader?"

"Just a drop. The used speeder stand on Telos Street. But I'm sure they'll change it now. I haven't told him about it—my orders were to report to you first."

"I will inform him. You have done well, Ferus Olin."

"Lord Vader isn't happy that I'm reporting to you," Ferus added. He was hoping to probe Palpatine a bit.

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“That is not your concern.”

“It makes it hard to work together. Perhaps if I knew more about him...”

He saw Palpatine pause. He’d interested him. “So, you are becoming curious about Lord Vader.”

“Everyone is curious about Lord Vader.”

“He prefers mystery. It is helpful. You have something else. Uniqueness. You were trained in the Force, and you rejected it. All the Jedi have been eliminated, but the Force remains. You could use it again.”

“I’m a little rusty,” Ferus said. Palpatine thought he was corruptible.

“You managed to find a lightsaber.”

“Lots of weapons around for sale after the Clone Wars. I managed to get my hands on one. It’s a dangerous galaxy out there.”

“You could have more power than any officer. More power,” Palpatine rasped, “than even Lord Vader himself.”

Here it was. The beginning.

“I’m not interested in power,” Ferus said.

“Everyone is interested in power,” Palpatine said. “But not everyone has the vision to see what *real* power can accomplish.”

Ferus rested his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. The Jedi hadn’t been about power. They’d used the Force to bring justice to the galaxy. But in truth the Force gave them great power, and many Padawans wrestled with the concept of it. When to use it, when to retreat, when to advance, when to demolish an enemy, and when to let them go. It was a constant struggle. And what every Padawan could not admit, even to each other, at night on their sleep couches, for even a whisper might bring the dark side too close—power felt good.

Ferus had fought against that feeling, had denied it existed, had thought he’d conquered it...but had he really?

He had brought up the topic with Siri—because Siri was the kind of Master you could talk to about anything. One of the

Jude Watson

countless things he missed about her was how nothing he could ask could possibly shock or disappoint her.

They were together on one of the terraces of the Temple. Siri had her booted feet propped up on a bench and was lying on the ground, her eyes closed. Ferus sat cross-legged (stiff as always, he thought now) by her side. It had been raining on Coruscant for weeks, and as soon as the sun appeared, she'd dragged him outside.

"For a lesson?" he had asked.

"For fun," she'd answered.

He had waited, gathering his courage. Only when he was sure she was completely relaxed did he bring up the subject. Maybe he was hoping she was asleep, and he wouldn't have to bring it up at all.

"Master, I've been thinking about something," he said. "I feel myself growing stronger in the Force. On this last mission...when we fought...I was...happy."

She opened one eye and looked at him. "Do you mean, when we fought side by side on Meldazar together, you felt pleasure in how you could move, could bring down your enemy with one stroke?"

"Yes." Ferus felt ashamed. "Is that wrong?"

"Well." She raised herself on her elbows. Sunlight picked out bright individual strands in her blond hair, which she'd recently cropped even shorter than usual.

"Yes," she said. "It is wrong to attach emotion in a battle. It's wrong to feel pleasure when an enemy falls. A Jedi should feel regret—regret that a life has been taken, regret that a physical battle had to be fought at all. But the Force gives us great gifts, Ferus. It isn't wrong to take pleasure in your own gifts. To take pleasure in your mastery of skill. It's a struggle for every Jedi to attain balance, sometimes even for Jedi Masters. Look at Mace Windu. His style is Form VII. What do you know about Form VII?"

"That only the best fighters can control it."

"Exactly. It can bring you close to the dark side, to what the Sith focus on. But Mace Windu can control it. My point is that even Mace Windu must acknowledge this danger, of the pleasure in power. That's the only way he can dismiss it. In other words, my perpetually worried Padawan"—Ferus remembered her smile, the rare smile that was gentle, not

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mischievous or mocking—*“the fact that you ask the question guards you against the dangers of it.”*

It had been a typical Jedi response. If you are aware of a problem, you take the first step toward eliminating it. Helpful at the time, but that was when he had a Temple to go to, Jedi Masters around him. All that careful study, all those simple and profound rules of the order—they had answered his every doubt.

Was leaving the Jedi a relief in a way because he never had to think about that again?

Why was he thinking about it now?

The memory and the questions had taken place in a mere flash of a moment, but Ferus was suddenly afraid. Afraid that too much time had passed between Palpatine’s statement and his own response. Afraid that Palpatine had known, somehow, unerringly, exactly what he’d been thinking.

“This is an interesting conversation, but I have some duties to take care of,” Ferus said, swallowing. His mouth was dry.

“Of course,” the Emperor said.

The hologram disappeared. Ferus felt the lightsaber hilt under his fingers. He ran his fingertips over the worn grooves in the carving. He thought of Garen Muln, the great Jedi Master who had given it to him. With that gift came responsibility, and also a connection to the way things used to be when he had a whole Jedi order to lean on. Before he was alone.

Give me your certainty, Garen, he thought. Give me your courage.

Chapter Eleven

Exercise was important. Bog got off the vibrotonic all-muscle trainer and padded off to the shower. He shipped the all-muscle trainer from post to post because he knew the importance of fitness. It cleared his head. He didn't trust a being who didn't take care of him- or herself. He was never too busy for his daily routine. Excess flesh disgusted him. He didn't want to turn into a Hutt.

His comlink buzzed. His assistant's voice came through. "Sano Sauro trying to reach you."

"Tell him I'll contact him shortly."

"He won't like that."

"No," Bog said, grabbing a towel, "he won't."

Sano Sauro. He'd been helpful. Everyone thought he was the brains behind Bog. It was true that Sauro had been instrumental in plotting the moves to get Bog in a position of influence, but Bog was tired of Sauro thinking he was in control. And now that Sauro's big idea, the *True Justice* ship that tried political prisoners in space, had been hijacked, he'd been censured by the Emperor. A little distance would be a good idea right about now, until Bog figured out if Sauro was out of the loop permanently or not.

In the meantime, let him sweat.

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The forty-five minutes of training had focused Bog's mind, made it sharp. All the steps he had taken were paying off. The Emperor himself had come to Sath, and Bog didn't think he was exaggerating to say that it had just a bit to do with him. He was making his mark.

Nobody had ever believed in him. Not his father, not his wife. But he'd always believed in his destiny.

At the thought of Astri, Bog frowned involuntarily. He'd gotten over the fact that his wife didn't love him anymore, long ago. He hadn't expected love. He'd expected a partnership. He was a politician; it helped to have a pretty wife. She never understood her role. Well, it was his own fault for picking a cook in a greasy diner as a wife. His head had been turned by her curls and her smiles. Her closeness to the Jedi hadn't hurt at the time, either.

Now she was gone. Disappeared. It didn't look right that he didn't have contact with his own son. He'd find Lune one day. When he was ruler of Samaria he would have much more muscle. And he wouldn't need a vibrotonic all-muscle trainer to exercise it, either! Pleased at his joke and at the results of his workout, Bog stepped into the shower.

The vote of no-confidence would be a lock. He'd made sure of that. But a little insurance might not be a bad idea. Something to boost him even more with the population so that when he took over, the transition would be smooth.

Becoming ruler of Samaria was just the first step. Why couldn't he control the whole Lemurtoo system, and move on from there?

This was his moment. He didn't need Sauro's advice. He didn't need anyone's. He was ready to strike out on his own. Take the big chance.

He slipped into his tunic and picked up his comlink as it signaled again.

"Sano Sauro is waiting," his assistant said.

Jude Watson

“Tell him I’m busy,” Bog said. He smiled, thinking of how that would infuriate Sauro. Let him steam.

Bog placed his personal droid on his shoulder. What a useful little device it was turning out to be.

Sauro had taught Bog well. To control a population, one must create an enemy, something for them to be afraid of. Then save them from it. It was as simple as that.

Chapter Twelve

For now, Ferus pushed the thought of who Vader might be to the back of his mind. It would be impossible to figure it out. Unless Vader made some kind of verbal slip or Ferus managed to stumble over new information, he wouldn't be able to discover it. He might never know.

What was he still doing here, anyway? Although he kept his eyes open, he hadn't learned very much about the Empire. Ferus had contacted the resistance, but he still wasn't sure how he could help them.

There were times that he felt he was doing absolutely the right thing for absolutely the right reasons. This was not one of those times.

He had been in the resistance on Bellassa, but he'd always been a reluctant hero. He'd fought briefly in the Clone Wars, but he hadn't been a great general like Obi-Wan. He hadn't adapted well to the army at all. He had fought side by side with Roan, but he hadn't been like the others, who'd joined the army for adventure. He'd seen adventure as a Jedi. He'd seen death and destruction and greed. He had no illusions about how thrilling great battles were. Great battles were hard and bloody and you never got the smell of it off you.

Jude Watson

Maybe he wasn't that great at being a double agent, either. He had hoped to learn more about the Empire's plans. He'd hoped that getting close to Palpatine and Vader would afford him the opportunity to discover if any Jedi were known to be alive, or held prisoner. But he could see that although it appeared he had the confidence of Palpatine, he wasn't really given access to anything that might help. He could observe all he wanted, but what he was able to observe was carefully controlled. Vader, he was sure, controlled it.

Would they ever let him in?

The city of Sath was running smoothly; there were no protests or fears that the Empire would take over, but Ferus felt uneasy. There was no battalion here, and though he'd kept his eyes and ears open he'd found no evidence that they were around. If Bog lost the vote, Vader would need muscle.

What he still hadn't figured out was why Palpatine himself had turned his attention here, and why his enforcer, Vader, was here, too. Was he missing something?

He just wanted to go back to the secret base and forget about Samaria, but something inside wouldn't let him. He hadn't had a chance to talk to Roan, to see what he'd been up to on Bellassa. He wanted to steal time, just a few days, to spend with him. He wanted to make sure the base was thriving, that Raina and Toma had what they needed. He wanted to enlist Clive to help them. There were things to do.

Ferus moved through the city streets of Sath. He stopped at the Twilight Fountains and paused to watch the colored spray change from aquamarine to gold to deep orange to navy blue and back again. He felt sadness wash over him but couldn't determine the cause. On Somaria, he felt something sucking at his footsteps, draining him. It wasn't the plight of the planet. Was it the fact that he couldn't see his path clearly? He kept going, one step at a time, and now he found himself shoulder to shoulder with Vader and Palpatine. He was learning nothing except that he had a powerful impulse to flee.

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The possibility of Vader being a fallen Jedi chilled him. How had it happened? How had he been corrupted? What terrible seduction drew him in?

“Ferus. Follow me.”

The words were low, spoken by someone behind his back. He recognized Nek’s soft tone. He began to move along the fountain, not turning to glimpse her until he felt it was clear. Then he leisurely made his way through the crowds out enjoying the artificially cooled air. He followed her reddish curls and weaved his way to her as she stopped near a wall. She put her hands on the top and hauled herself up, then sat, legs kicking, a few meters away from others who had done the same.

Ferus pulled himself up beside her. He could see immediately why she’d chosen this spot to perch. The entire plaza was visible from here. Behind them was another wall. Another short jump would lead them to an upper walkway with access to several airbus routes and main thoroughfares. It would be relatively easy to lose a tail if they spotted one.

Still kicking her feet casually against the wall, Nek spoke in a worried voice. “We’ve got trouble. Maybe.”

“Tell me.”

“We’ve been monitoring some of Bog’s activities through his PD. We’ve got evidence of bribery.”

“That’s good.”

“There’s something else...the personal droid has been linked up with two Roshan prowler droids.”

“Aren’t they illegal on Samaria?”

“Yes. He must have smuggled them in.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Maybe he’s going to do something and blame it on the Roshans. That’s what we fear.”

“What do you think it will be?”

“I don’t know. But we were wondering...”

“...if I could go check it out. Do you know where he is now?”

Jude Watson

Nek nodded. “We have him in the government district—the diplomatic wing of the Residence Tower. He’s meeting with the Roshan delegation.”

“This can’t be good,” Ferus said. “I’ll be in touch.”

Ferus leaped to the next wall, then ran lightly down the walkway. He hailed an air taxi and gave the driver the address. He handed over a wad of credits. “If you get me there in less than five minutes, you’ll get more.”

The driver looked at the credits in her hand. “I’ll get you there before you can blink, with these.”

The air taxi moved quickly through the traffic, weaving in and out of lanes and accomplishing a few highly illegal maneuvers. The driver proudly pulled up in front of the Residence Tower in four minutes flat. Ferus pressed another wad of credits in her hand and jumped out.

He waved his Imperial security tag at the sensor and the light blinked green. Ferus hopped aboard the turbolift. Being a double agent occasionally had its advantages. At least he didn’t have to waste time breaking in.

He was whisked up to the two hundredth floor, a central lobby for the block of floors where visiting diplomats were housed during their stays in Sath. He stepped out into a luxurious space. Ten different hallways spun out from the center. Ferus paused. He reached out for the Force. He picked up the Living Force around him. After only a moment he turned and sprinted down one of the hallways.

He paused in front of a transparisteel door. Outside was a combination landing platform and meeting room. The meeting room was encased in the same climate-controlled bubble that dotted many of the outdoor spaces in Sath. Bog Divinian sat in an informal grouping with the Roshan delegation. The usual empty smile was on Bog’s face, and Ferus watched as he gestured around toward the city surrounding them.

Nothing had happened...yet.

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Bog's personal aide, a slender young woman named Nancer, stood nearby. Ferus noted that Bog's airspeeder was outside on the landing platform. Two Imperial airspeeders were parked nearby, each with two stormtroopers inside. Bodyguards for Bog, Ferus imagined.

Ferus accessed the door and slipped into the room. Nancer looked over at him but turned her attention back to Bog. She knew Ferus as a favorite of Palpatine's and would not interfere with him.

"So you see, even though I oppose the trade agreement, I don't oppose an alliance with Rosha, should I be elected," Bog was saying.

"Advisor Divinian, let us be frank," the senior Roshan diplomat said. Ferus remembered his name—Robbyn Sark. "You have spread misinformation about us among the people of Sath. Now they distrust our motives."

Bog waved his hands in the air as though he were swatting an insect. "Whether or not you had anything to do with sabotage of the Platform-7 computer—"

"No." Ferus admired Robbyn Sark's tone. The Roshan did not raise his voice, but the authority it carried had the power to silence even Bog Divinian. "We had nothing to do with the sabotage, and you know it. We are alone here, Advisor Divinian. Let's speak with honesty."

"Of course," Bog said blandly. "I'm a straight shooter. Always have been."

"You are opposing the trade agreement for your own reasons. They have nothing to do with the well-being of the two planets. Let's discuss how we could work together. You said you wanted to find a compromise."

"That's why I'm here," Bog said. "Let's find some common ground. I have a proposition for you. My speeder is outside. Come with me for a short trip around Sath. I have some things to show you. We can discuss the current situation in privacy."

Jude Watson

Bog looked around the meeting room and leaned forward. “You can never trust meeting rooms where diplomats stay,” he whispered. “We can speak freely in my speeder.”

Robbyn Sark glanced at the four other Roshans. A signal passed between them. Their delicate antennae, which looked more like tiny hairs, waved softly.

“All right,” Robbyn Sark agreed.

Ferus followed, still unsure of what Bog was up to. He trailed after the others as they walked out onto the landing platform. Like all the platforms on Sath, it was regulated with cool air from the floor and overhang, and a fine mist also served to freshen the air.

Still, before them the buildings of Sath seemed to shiver in the heat, their outlines wavy and indistinct. The sun was low in the sky, at exactly an angle to bounce off the thousands of windows and the thin metallic skins of the buildings. It dazzled the eye and disoriented him. It took Ferus a moment to realize that the glint in the air above was not a reflection, but a moving airspeeder, coming at them at a direct angle and not slowing down to land. At the same time, something else caught his attention—at first he thought it was debris in the air. The specks were moving erratically, as if caught by a breeze. But there was no breeze.

Their droids are among the smallest in the galaxy with the most sophisticated systems.

Roshan droids.

Bog didn’t seem to notice any of it. He fiddled with the PD on his shoulder as he gestured grandly at his luxurious airspeeder, saying something to Robbyn Sark that Ferus didn’t hear.

“Watch out!” Ferus shouted, but it was too late. The silver airspeeder came in low and fast. Then to Ferus’s astonishment the engines stopped dead. He saw a slight hooded figure in black lying flat on the hull. A liquid cable line snaked down and wrapped around Bog’s personal droid. It was yanked upward.

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Ferus saw Bog's frightened face as he dropped to the ground. The engines screamed back to maximum. Ferus was already moving, racing to the nearest airspeeder on the platform.

In the meantime, the stormtroopers had finally reacted and were blasting away at the fleeing airspeeder. Bog covered his head. The two Roshan droids turned and gave chase.

Ferus made the quick calculations even as he pushed the controls of the speeder. Someone had stolen Bog's personal droid, and it wasn't the resistance. They had no reason to. They had every reason for Bog to retain the droid. They knew what was on it. The proof of Bog's bribes were embedded in its programming. Ferus had to get the droid back.

The silver airspeeder headed straight for the thickly clustered tall buildings of Sath. The stormtroopers behind him didn't seem to mind if Ferus got caught in the middle. Swerving to avoid the fire behind him, Ferus moved to an upper traffic lane. With any luck the thief would notice only the stormtroopers in pursuit, not him.

He pushed his speed, trying to keep the silver speeder in sight below him but not attract attention. He saw the Roshan droids tracking, occasionally sending a thin beam of energy blasting toward the silver speeder that seemed so accurate Ferus was always surprised when it missed.

Screaming through the Sathan skies, Ferus called on the Force to help him maneuver. He pulled up just in time to avoid smashing into an airbus. The glare of the flashing reflections, the buzzing of the Roshan droids, and the traffic around and below him kept him busy.

Whoever was piloting the speeder sure knew how to fly. Ferus soared high above the speeder, tracking it through the space lanes. One droid sent an arc of blaster fire toward it, but the speeder flipped over, flew upside down, and spiraled into an opening in the traffic above. Ferus had to admire the pilot's skill.

Who was it? If it wasn't the resistance, who could it be?

Chapter Thirteen

“I think you can slow down,” Trever said through clenched teeth. “The stormtroopers are falling behind.”

“You don’t slow down until you’re home free,” Flame said. “They aren’t giving up. They’re just trying to make me think they’re giving up. I’d better drop you somewhere with the droid. Then we can meet up later. You can lose the speeders a lot easier on foot.”

“Drop me?” Trever asked as Flame flipped the craft to one side to squeeze in between two buildings. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Don’t worry.” Flame laughed. “I’ll get you down in one piece.” She shot him an admiring glance. “I like your style, kid. You swiped that droid like a pro.”

“I *am* a pro,” Trever said. “I mean, I might have done a bit of, uh, unauthorized lifting of goods on Bellassa.” He shrank back as Flame zoomed into a tunnel, hugging the top of it to keep in the shadows. Trever felt as though the top of his head was going to slam against the wall of the tunnel.

“Funny how skills like that come in handy in the resistance,” Flame said. As soon as they shot out of the tunnel, she flipped over and quickly descended three space lanes. “I got most of my piloting skills from avoiding air traffic tickets.”

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Trever watched as she flew and scanned the buildings around at the same time. He glanced behind. The droids were still tailing them, but he couldn't see the stormtroopers now.

"This is our chance," she murmured. "The droids will follow me, most likely. I'm going to drop down into one of the courtyards. You're going to have to jump. Then start running. I'll contact you on your comlink when I think it's safe."

"All right." Trever crouched on his seat, Bog's droid on his shoulder.

The airspeeder dropped so quickly Trever felt sure he'd left his stomach up in the space lane. But there was no time to get dizzy. The ground loomed toward him. The cockpit canopy rolled back, and the wind blew in his face. He snapped his helmet cover down.

"If someone follows you, shoot," Flame said, tossing him a blaster. "Now jump!"

Ferus flew, taking chance after chance. With the help of the Force, he was finding holes in traffic to slip through that didn't exist fractions of a second before. The speeder below had lost the stormtroopers, but for how long?

In answer, he saw the stormtroopers suddenly appear, bursting out of a tunnel that the speeder had disappeared into. Suddenly the silver speeder below reversed direction and went into a dive. The stormtrooper airspeeders overshot it, tried to reverse, and made an awkward spinning turn that nearly sent one into an airbus while the other clipped a building. A tremendous air traffic snarl instantly locked everyone in place.

Ferus merely reversed his engines and went backward, cursing as he looked over his shoulder and tried to gauge distances between vehicles and swerving from one space lane to another. He saw the silver speeder drop into a courtyard while the droids streaked past, just missing the speeder's fast descent.

Jude Watson

Ferus hit a hard right and hovered over a landing platform twenty stories up, monitoring the last of the silver speeder's descent. Someone tumbled out and the speeder zoomed off while the thief disappeared belowground into some sort of parking facility. Ferus parked his own vehicle and leaped out in one smooth movement, then Force-jumped twenty stories to the courtyard below.

He couldn't tell if the thief was a man or woman; he just knew whoever it was was slight and could run fast. He'd barely gotten a glimpse before the thief disappeared into the parking hangar.

He heard running footsteps on the permacrete and took off, snaking through parked speeders, ready to activate his lightsaber. He leaped over one speeder, and blasterfire streaked toward him. He lifted his lightsaber to deflect it back but stopped.

"Ferus! Don't!"

In a split second of incredible timing, Ferus managed to halt his movement and somersault away from the energy blasts. He leaped over the last speeder and onto the ground.

"Trever?"

Trever slowly rose, his head peeking over a cockpit canopy. "You know, you're pretty good with that thing. A guy could get killed."

"What are you doing?" Ferus asked furiously. His hands were shaking. He had come close to deflecting fire back at Trever. He pushed the image of the boy lying on the ground, lifeless, out of his mind. *Acknowledge the mistake, and move on.*

Or, as Siri used to say, *There's always time to kick yourself later.*

He sprang forward and yanked on Trever's arm, pulling him into the relative safety of the shadows near the great pillars that held up the roof of the hangar.

"I'm helping the resistance," Trever said, shaking off Ferus's hand.

"I don't think so. Who was driving that speeder?"

"Flame. Toma was in contact with her."

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“Who’s Flame?” Ferus grabbed the droid. “Actually, I don’t have time for this now—I have to get this back to Bog.”

“You’re going to take it *back*? Do you have any idea how hard it was to get it?”

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Helping you.”

“I’ve got news for you.” Ferus tucked the droid under his arm. “You’re not helping.”

“Watch out!” Suddenly, Trever slammed into Ferus, sending him flying. At the same time, Ferus saw the droids darting through the air, straight for him.

Chapter Fourteen

Ferus pushed Trever under a heavy speeder and whirled up, clutching Bog's droid in one hand and his lightsaber in the other. The droids followed.

Why him and not Trever? He'd assumed they'd locked on Trever earlier. Their beaming accuracy had been aimed at the fleeing speeder. He'd been sure that they'd hit several times...

Wait a second.

Ferus backed up, leaping up on the roof of a speeder. Red beams of blaster energy shot out toward him. Instead of deflecting them, he stood motionless.

"Ferus!" Trever screamed.

The beams passed over him harmlessly. Just as he'd suspected.

Ferus put Bog's droid on the top of the speeder and jumped down. The droids circled and came back. This time when they approached, he leaped up and caught both of them easily, one in each hand.

"Wow," Trever said.

Ferus sat, turning the droids over in his hands. He checked the weapons system displays. Trever approached curiously. "What are you doing?"

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“That blaster fire was benign. There was no charge. I’m just wondering why.”

“We got lucky?”

“And they were locked onto Bog’s personal droid.” Ferus thought back to the moment on the landing platform when Trever had swiped Bog’s droid. The Roshan droids had *already* been moving toward it. They’d been locked on to Bog’s droid. For what? A demonstration?

Ferus stood, tucking the two Roshan droids into his pocket. “Come on. We’ve got to get back.”

A disgruntled Trever followed him without a word. He quickly found the turbolift to the landing platform above. Ferus climbed into the pilot seat and indicated a cargo space in the back. “You’re going to have to hide in there.” As Trever began to protest, Ferus cut him off. “Just do it. And don’t say a word. I’ll explain later.”

He powered up the engines and rose into the traffic lanes. He saw patrolling airspeeders with stormtroopers, and some now on swoop bikes, flooding the space lanes, looking for the silver craft. Ferus avoided them and entered a stream of traffic back toward the Residence Tower. The whole adventure had taken less than ten minutes.

He came in high, leaving Bog plenty of time to identify him. Stormtroopers ringed the platform, blaster rifles ready.

“Whoa. Maybe you’d better rethink this approach,” Trever whispered, peeking out of the cargo compartment.

“Stay down! It’s all right—they think I’m one of them, remember?”

As Ferus brought the vehicle down, he saw that Bog had retreated into the meeting room again. The Roshan delegation was gone. Bog was speaking to a short Sathan that Ferus recognized as the lead communications officer. A few other Sathans were in the room. Ferus tried to glimpse them through the glare of transparisteel. They looked like...reporters?

Jude Watson

He got out, holding the droid. Bog saw him from inside. He said a few quick words to the others and came out, hurrying toward Ferus.

Ferus handed him the droid.

“You got it back.” Bog’s eyes narrowed. “Who took it?”

“Just a common street thief, looking for something to sell on the black market.”

“Is the womp rat in custody? I’d like to fry him up for breakfast.”

A squeak came from the speeder. Luckily, Bog didn’t hear it.

“No,” Ferus said. “He dropped the droid, I caught it, and came back here. I guess he realized it was a stupid idea.”

“Did you have any trouble...getting back here?”

“No.”

Was that a flash of relief on Bog’s face? He perched the droid back on his shoulder. “I thought coming here to speak to the delegation would make a difference. Bridge the gap.” He shook his head. “I never expected they’d have the nerve to try to assassinate me.”

“What?”

Bog leaned in. “Those droids...in the air? We ran a security check on them during the attack. They were Roshan. There was blasterfire coming from them, straight at me. Luckily, I have good reflexes.”

“The droids didn’t shoot at you. That blasterfire was from the stormtroopers. They were aiming at the thief!”

Bog frowned at him. “You couldn’t know that.”

“I was standing only a few meters away,” Ferus said. “The shots came from the stormtroopers. They were shooting at the speeder.”

He had the Roshan droids in his pocket. But they would prove nothing. Handing them over now would just confirm their existence and give more credibility to Bog’s lie.

But now Ferus understood. This was all a ploy for Bog to gain sympathy. Bog had done this himself. He had set up the

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situation. The Roshan droids had been programmed to fire at his droid. It was Trever's bad luck that he happened to steal Bog's droid at the same time. But Bog had turned the incident to his advantage. He would claim the thief was part of the Roshan plot.

Ferus was trapped. He couldn't expose Bog without exposing Trever.

Bog leaned in toward him, his eyes like slits. Ferus found himself looking into a gaze empty of intelligence but full of menace. Ferus wasn't intimidated, but he did see that if he interfered with what Bog was planning, the politician would not take it lightly.

"Since there is no way for you to have really seen it, I hope you keep your mistaken impressions to yourself," he said. "You think that because the Emperor has given you amnesty that he can't revoke that order at any time? The Emperor came to *my* planet, to *my* ceremony. Who do you think he's going to believe?"

"*Your* planet?" Ferus said. "Since when?"

"Just don't get in my way," Bog warned.

Ferus watched as Bog turned away, the droid still on his shoulder. He walked back into the meeting room while the reporters scrambled to get close.

He was about to spin the story for all of Samaria.

Ferus had a bad feeling. A very bad feeling.

Bog overestimated his own importance. He was just a tool to the Emperor.

So was Ferus.

Trapped.

This time, Ferus signed out the airspeeder, which was registered to the Residence Tower. Trever hid in the back until they were safely away. Ferus pulled up at the Twilight Fountains.

Jude Watson

Trever hopped out, a disgruntled look on his face. “I can’t believe you took the droid back. I went to a lot of trouble to steal it.”

“It was a stupid idea. If you want to help the resistance, you don’t just bumble your way in. You contact them first!”

“Flame thought they wouldn’t take her seriously if she didn’t pull off some kind of mission first—”

“Who’s Flame?” Ferus interrupted.

“I told you, a contact of Toma’s.” The boy looked sulky now. “She had gravsleds full of wealth on Acherin—factories and businesses and all that—but she had one problem. She said no to the Empire, so they kicked her off the planet. But she was able to get most of her wealth out before that. She put it all into this group she’s forming called Moonstrike. She has this idea to fund all the resistance groups on planets in the Core. And she’s putting her own wealth and her own safety on the line. Plus she’s one awesome pilot. She’s galactic.”

“So Toma set up this meeting? He sent you?” Ferus knew Trever well by now. He saw the lie beginning to form on the boy’s face. “Toma didn’t send you. You came yourself.”

“Well, they weren’t about to consider me. But it was too dangerous for any of them. So I...”

“You...”

“Took the ship,” Trever mumbled. “And came here.”

“You left them without a ship?”

“So? They didn’t have one before!”

“Where is the ship now?”

“In the Crystal Forest.”

“All right. As soon as we finish here, I want you to get back there, get the ship, and go back to the base.”

“Yessir, General Ferus-Wan, sir,” Trever said. “Except for one thing. There’s no more ship.”

Ferus closed his eyes. “No more ship?”

“I sort of crashed it.”

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Ferus didn't want to believe it, but could. "Did anyone see you?"

"Just a couple of stormtroopers. But I got away in Flame's speeder. It was one incredible ride, let me tell you. And this idea of the central funding of resistance groups—she's got all these plans to mobilize, and find other investors...we've got to bring her to the resistance here so that they can join Moonstrike."

"I'm not taking her to the resistance."

"Why not?"

"Trever, she could be anyone."

"But Toma knows her!"

"What you told me was that she contacted Toma. He doesn't know if she's for real, either. I can't endanger the resistance by bringing a stranger to them."

"She's not a stranger!"

"I'll bring them her message, that's all." Ferus looked at Trever carefully. "Did you tell her about the secret base?"

"Of course not! I wouldn't do that—I'm not completely stupid. But I do think she could help. We need more supplies there. Toma and Raina have been having a hard time. She could fund the base, fund your search. This could be our chance to really build something, not just a base for a couple of Jedi."

Ferus shook his head through Trever's speech. "If the base is to succeed, it has to be small. And the fewer beings who know about it, the better. Even if Flame checks out, I don't want to link the base to a galaxy-wide resistance movement—not yet, anyway."

"But that's the only way we'll defeat the Empire."

"I know that. But moving prematurely could endanger all of us. I created the base in order to gather Jedi. Period. If we get too ambitious, we could risk everything. The base must remain a secret."

"You've got some weird wacky Jedi obsession, that's your problem," Trever grumbled. "They kicked you out, so now you have to prove that you're worthy or something."

Jude Watson

“They didn’t kick me out,” Ferus said. “I left. And this search has nothing to do with me. It has to do with saving anything that might be left.” Ferus struggled with his own annoyance at what the boy had said. “An alliance of resistance groups is necessary, I agree. But I am beginning to understand this: In the end, only the Force will defeat the Emperor.”

Obi-Wan had tried to tell him that. He hadn’t been ready to listen. He thought of Obi-Wan now, in self-imposed exile on Tatooine. *The hardest thing to do*, Obi-Wan had said, *is to wait*.

What was Obi-Wan waiting for? Ferus had thought that it had to do with waiting in the abstract. Waiting for luck, waiting for chance, waiting for the galaxy to begin to rise up. Now he realized something: Obi-Wan was waiting for something specific. Ferus didn’t know what. He wasn’t meant to know. Obi-Wan couldn’t tell him. But somehow, Obi-Wan had hope.

“Look, I’ve seen the Force work,” Trever said. “I know it’s full-moon amazing and all that. But it isn’t *everything*. It’s just a part of what can bring them down. You aren’t giving Flame a chance.”

“I will give her a chance,” Ferus said. “But not with the base. I’ll bring her message to the resistance.”

“Take me with you.”

“No. You know how a resistance works. A resistance can only operate if the fewest people possible know who is in the group.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Of course I trust you. But this is the best way, Trever. Now let me figure out how to get you another ship. You’ve got to get off-planet. There might be an Imperial crackdown on air traffic very soon. You’re lucky you weren’t blasted out of the sky.”

“Is this what you were like as a Jedi Padawan? No wonder no one liked you,” Trever burst out.

Ferus stopped short as Trever’s words hit him in the face. He stood still for a moment as the meaning sank in.

As much as he wanted to control this, he couldn’t. He had to stop underestimating Trever. He was treating him like a child,

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and he wasn't. Siri would have known that. Obi-Wan would have known that. Trever had been through so much. He'd done so much. He was capable of so much more.

"Yes," Ferus admitted. "You're right. That's what I was like." Then he sighed. "Okay, I'll contact the resistance. I'll tell them about you. This is a meeting place, right here. They'll find you. You'll be able to tell Flame's story your own way, and they can make the decision whether to meet with her. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Trever said, but his jaw was still set.

Ferus's comlink signaled. He looked at it. He was wanted back at Imperial headquarters. He hated to leave things like this with Trever.

"I have to go," he said.

"Oh, is the Emperor calling you?" Trever asked in a stinging tone. "Ready to do his bidding?"

"You know why I'm doing this," Ferus said.

Trever looked at him, his expression clouded with his disappointment. "Not really. I know this, though: If you get that close to evil, it can rub off on you."

Ferus walked away, toward the speeder. He had no answer to give Trever.

Because deep in his heart, he suspected that Trever was right.

Chapter Fifteen

Darth Vader wanted to avoid this particular discussion with his Master, but he could not. Palpatine appeared in hologram form, his hands tucked into the pockets of his robe.

"I received a report that there was an assassination attempt on Divinian's life," the Emperor began.

"Doubtful," Vader replied. "I have received contradictory reports. Divinian wants to be a hero and is blaming the Roshans."

"I am starting to be impressed by our Bog."

Vader's voice remained cold. "He wants to rule Samaria. He wants real power."

"His personal droid was retrieved by Ferus Olin."

"I have requested a full report from him," Vader said.

"Your stormtroopers went after the thief, but it was Ferus Olin who was successful."

This was exactly why he didn't want to have this talk.

Vader decided to change the subject. "Roshan droids were spotted as well. I think they were set off by Divinian."

"Interesting." The Emperor laughed softly to himself.

"With the assassination attempt, his support is greater than ever. Sathans will think Larker is a fool for trusting the Roshans."

"A good sign."

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“My presence here is no longer required, then?”

“Wait and make sure Divinian is elected. I want an Imperial governor in every capital city.”

“Divinian will be elected, just as you planned, my Master.”

Palpatine continued, “In the meantime...Ferus Olin’s power is growing. I sense great...uncertainty in him.”

“Will he join us?”

Palpatine smiled. “He will become one of us.”

The hologram of his Master faded. Darth Vader didn’t move.

No. Not Ferus Olin.

It was time to get rid of him.

Olin was a reminder of his past. His past was dead. Olin must follow.

Chapter Sixteen

Ferus appeared in Darth Vader's office. "At your service."

"I have a job for you," Vader said.

"I take orders from the Emperor."

"The Emperor has commanded me. You can check with him if you like." Vader assumed that Ferus would decide not to. And even if he did, his Master had told him to help Bog Divinian before the vote. He could always claim that this was his intent.

"What's the job?"

"Find the thief who stole Bog Divinian's personal droid." Vader enjoyed the look of surprise on Ferus Olin's face.

"But the droid has been returned—"

"The thief was involved in the assassination attempt."

"There was no assassination attempt," Ferus said impatiently. "Bog made it up to make himself look like a hero."

"All the more reason to find the thief. If someone appears who can denounce Divinian, it could influence the vote."

"I can't find him again—I didn't see much."

"I'm sure you will be able to. If you fail, I will institute mass arrests. A battalion orbiting Lemurtoo is awaiting my order to invade."

There. At last. Ferus Olin looked uneasy.

"I think this is a bad idea—"

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“I am not interested in your opinion, Ferus Olin,” Vader said. Ferus turned and walked out. Vader had threatened him and gained his cooperation. A small victory. But tasty enough to savor.

Ferus stood in the hallway outside the door. He couldn’t turn in Trever, of course. But he had no doubt that Vader would follow through on his threat. In the meantime, there were only a few hours before the no-confidence vote in the ministers’ hall. It was time for the resistance to mobilize and expose Bog.

At the very least, it would serve as a distraction.

As he stood, his heartbeat quickened. Something was different. He listened carefully. Usually the sounds at headquarters were muffled and indistinct. But he could hear voices and footsteps. It wasn’t as though the place was coming alive...it was just more activity than usual.

He saw a nervous-looking junior officer heading down the hall. Ferus pretended to walk by him, then doubled back. The officer was speaking into a comlink.

Ferus kept well behind him, but accessed the Force. He screened out all the other noise and concentrated on that one voice.

“The troops are mobilized and ready for his order. Yes, sir. Garrison has been shifted to Order Thirty-Seven. Delegation is making plans to depart, but they are still quartered in the tower.”

Thirty-seven. Ferus knew that directive from his time on Bellassa. It meant that mass arrests were planned.

Ferus reversed direction again and headed for the exit, his heart pounding. Vader had lied to him. He had already given an order to his battalion. They were standing by. But who was he targeting?

Ferus had little doubt the Roshan delegation would be first.

Jude Watson

He found Dinko, Nek, and Firefolk talking to Trever and Flame at the cantina. Ferus took a seat at the table. He nodded at Flame. If the resistance had included her, he would have to as well.

"I've heard a lot about you," she told him.

"I've got news," he said. "The Imperial battalion is on alert."

"For what?" Dinko asked. "Invasion?"

"My guess is that they're in reserve in case Bog isn't elected. Anyone who protests will find themselves in an Imperial jail."

"It's happening," Nek said. "What we feared for so long."

"Is there anything we can do to stop this?" Flame asked.

Ferus frowned. "We're missing something. What does the Empire have against Rosha? Why do they want to stop the trade agreement? They're willing to invade a planet that isn't even hostile to them."

"We've had a rivalry with the Rosha, but lately we've realized that we can benefit each other," Dinko said. "Before Bog started spreading lies about Rosha, diplomacy was working."

Ferus took out the two Roshan droids and put them on the table. Firefolk leaned over with interest. "I've never actually seen these," he said. "It's illegal to import them." Firefolk began to tinker with one of the droids, snapping off its control panel. "I'm a systems designer. This is a whole new technology to learn."

Ferus leaned toward him. "Larker told me that the Roshans were experts in microtechnology."

Firefolk nodded, still examining the droid. "Part of our rivalry, of course, was based on fear. Fear that their droids could invade our systems." He let out a low whistle. "Would you look at this. A universal receiver microchip. And a remote sensory plug-in...with amazing range. I heard a rumor they'd developed this stuff, but..."

"What is it?"

"They can transfer information from any mainframe without a plug-in. This is an amazing delivery system. They can do it from distances, from the air." Firefolk took out his datapad and began

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to run tests on the droid. “It’s got a direct system pathway to the photoreceptors and the movement sensors, so I’m guessing this is a way for the droid to read another droid’s programming...so it can avoid collision, say, or duplication. All in less than a second. On a world with heavy droid use like Roshana, it would be a necessity. Their droids fly, ours just hover. So in less than a second, they can single out what they need to know—the other droid’s path, for example, so they can make a countermove. I’ve seen versions of this, but this is way beyond. Technically, it’s highly sophisticated.”

“Wait a second,” Ferus said. “You mean they read the other droid’s programming and analyze it?”

Firefolk looked at his datapad, which was now interfaced with the droid. “They don’t read it, they duplicate it, *transfer* it to their own system, analyze what they need, and then dump it.”

“Couldn’t they steal it, then?”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Firefolk said. “Not really. It has to be garbaged out. A droid this size doesn’t have near the capacity to hold on to that much information. It can receive it, but it can only process a bit of it. If the droid kept all that information, it would overload and self-destruct.”

Ferus felt an excitement rise up from his boots. “But here in Sath, you’ve pioneered the delivery of vast amounts of information from a BRT to a personal droid.”

“Yes, it’s loaded on from mainframes that we have at home, or at businesses we frequent. And we have what we call safeguard passageways to avoid overloading the droid,” Dinko explained.

“What if the technology of both droids were put together?” Ferus asked. He turned to the others excitedly. “The Roshana droid has the ability to pull information from another droid. The Samaritan droid has the ability to hook up to a vast BRT system. What if you built a super-droid that could grab enormous amounts of information without a plug-in? What if the droid

Jude Watson

could scramble the information and then send it all into a *second* droid?”

Firefolk sat still for a minute, thinking. “You mean pass random information from a BRT to another droid? It would have to be super fast. It’s possible in theory...but that means that a vast amount of information would be passed back.”

Dinko let out a breath. “If we married our BRT system software to their droid system software...”

Nek leaned forward. “...but used the hardware of our PDs...we target any droid and pass a flood of information to it...”

“...and the targeted droid would overload,” Firefolk said.

Flame let out a breath. “Like a commander battle droid?”

“Or any Imperial droid?” Trever asked. “This is...”

“Unbelievable,” Firefolk murmured. “But...possible.”

“And that is why,” Ferus said, “the Emperor doesn’t want a trade agreement between Samaria and Rosha. Because together you are a real danger to the Empire. If you could really do this, you could knock out their surveillance droids. Maybe even the stormtrooper communications systems. Everything they depend on for keeping the galaxy under their control.”

“Just with our personal droids,” Nek breathed. “Just by being able to transfer too much information.”

“How do you like that,” Trever said. “Buy a cup of tea, annihilate an army. All in a droid’s day’s work!”

“And if you exported your system to other planets...” Ferus said.

“It’s the key to a galaxy-wide resistance,” Flame said. Her cheeks were flushed. “Moonstrike could fund it.”

“Wait a second,” Ferus said. “Remember, we’re not the first to put this together. That’s why they want to control Samaria. So they can move on to Rosha, too. Control both your worlds and stop any information exchange before it starts. I don’t know whether Divinian is in on it or not—I’d doubt it. He’s not high up enough and they don’t value him...but he’s played right into

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their plan. Now they'll arrest the Roshan delegation and imprison them. They can't let them get back to Rosha. They've had meetings with technicians here. Sooner or later they might figure it out, too."

Firefolk's hands were careful as he placed the droid back on the table. "What do we do now?"

"We bring this idea to the Roshan delegation," Ferus said. "And we've got to get them off-planet. The Empire is monitoring all departures, so getting them out will be tricky. They can't leave from Sath. And they can't use their own ship."

"The Crystal Forest. I can do it," Flame said. "I've got the ship. I'll get them home."

Ferus nodded. "In the meantime, the resistance has to influence the no-confidence vote. Bog must be exposed. Now is the time. The vote is scheduled to take place in less than an hour. I'll go with Flame and Trever and smuggle out the Roshans."

Dinko nodded. "Nek and Firefolk and I will head for the Hall of Ministers."

Dinko, Nek, and Firefolk hurried out of the cantina.

"I've only got one more problem," Ferus said.

"What?" Trever asked.

Ferus thought of Darth Vader and his ultimatum. He'd like to think that Vader would be too busy in a little while to care, but he knew in addition to being an evil mastermind, Vader was an awesome multi-tasker.

He looked at Trever. Affection washed over him, and he smiled at the boy's earnest expression underneath that thatch of blue hair. "You."

Chapter Seventeen

Ferus didn't know what to expect when he, Flame, and Trever arrived at the Residence Tower. The landing platform on level two hundred was empty of stormtroopers. He parked the airspeeder and was able to enter the tower without a problem. Obviously the Empire's forces were not expecting a rescue attempt. Why should they? The Samaritans were now convinced that the Roshans were their enemies.

Ferus walked out into the small lobby. There was a datascreen set into the wall by the central reception area. He keyed in the Roshan delegation and the screen flashed a room number ten stories above.

Ferus accessed the turbolift and they jumped on. They exited on the two hundred and tenth floor. Ferus silently moved toward the corner that would give him a vantage point into the hall. He quickly ducked back. The door to the Roshan suite was being patrolled by six Prowler 1000 droids and several dwarf spider droids.

He quickly explained the situation to Flame and Trever. "It won't be a problem," he said. "I can take them down. But they'll send a signal back, and reinforcements will be sent."

Flame patted her blaster. "We'll be ready."

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Ferus turned to Trever. "Do you have any of your smoke grenades?"

"I happen to have a couple right here," Trever said, reaching into his utility belt.

"Save them for now. We'll need a way out of here. Okay, as soon as I take care of the droids, follow me."

Ferus activated his lightsaber. Flame's eyes grew wide.

"Did I mention he once trained to be a Jedi?" Trever asked.

Ferus charged into the hallway. The prowler droids immediately darted toward him like a flock of angry birds. He leaped up, slashing the first one into smoking bits, then reversed and took out two more. Meanwhile the spider droids sent blaster fire his way. He deflected it back to one, which burst into flame. He took out the other spider droid and casually sliced the last prowler in two with a backward swipe as he strode to the door.

He heard Flame's soft voice from down the hall. "No, Trever. You didn't mention it."

Ferus opened the door.

Robbyn Sark and the rest of the delegation stood in the middle of the room, blasters in their hands. All of them were pointed at him. Obviously they had heard the commotion in the hallway.

"We do not recognize your authority," Robbyn Sark said. "We will not subject ourselves to arrest."

"I'm not here to arrest you," Ferus said, deactivating his lightsaber and clipping it back to his belt. "I'm here to take you home."

Trever ran in. "We've got trouble. Stormtroopers entering the building and more spider droids. That didn't take long."

"We've got to get to the landing platform. We can't take the turbolift," Ferus said. "We'll take the stairs."

"There are no stairs," Robbyn Sark said.

"We'll have to chance the turbolift, then. Or..." Ferus strode to the windows. "We could launch a liquid cable, but we'll be

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spotted. They can pick us off if they have the range. And they do.”

“There might be another way,” Robbyn Sark said. “The utility lift. It’s used for linens and room-service trays. It won’t fit all of us at once, but it will hold a few of us at a time.”

“Good idea.” Ferus turned to Trever. “Set off some smoke grenades in all the turbolift banks. Fast.”

“I’m on it.” Trever took off.

Robbyn Sark led them to the utility turbolift. It was a small, squat lift where droids bundled laundry and delivered room-service trays. There was enough room for three at a time, if they crouched and squeezed.

“I’ll go down with the first load,” Ferus said. “Just in case there’s trouble. Can you stay here and help the rest of the Roshans?” he asked Flame.

“I won’t leave them,” she promised.

Robbyn Sark and another delegation member entered, bending over and fitting their bodies into the space. Ferus followed, squeezing in next to them. He hit the sensor for the two-hundredth floor. As they descended, the first fire alarms began to ring. “Don’t worry, it’s just the smoke grenades,” he told them. “They’ll have to evacuate the building—or at least part of it. We can use that as cover for our escape.”

“We’ll have to get to our ship,” Robbyn Sark said. “No doubt it will be heavily guarded.”

“I’ve already found you a ride,” Ferus said. “And I’ve seen her flying skills. She’ll get you back to Rosha.”

“Why are you doing this?” Robbyn Sark asked.

“I’ve got a long answer to that question,” Ferus said.

The sound of explosives suddenly came to their ears. “I’ll take the short version,” Robbyn Sark said.

They reached the two-hundredth floor. Ferus emerged first, listening carefully. He sent the utility turbolift back up. There was the muted sound of activity, doors opening and closing, footsteps. The evacuation had begun. Smoke was out in the

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hallway, but they covered their faces with their hoods and moved quickly.

He led the Roshans to the landing platform. As soon as they were outside, they took gulps of air. He quickly led them to the speeder and then realized his mistake—it was too small. Fortunately, larger transport was parked nearby, a luxury model with plenty of seating.

While they waited for the others, Ferus quickly told Robbyn Sark of what he and the resistance had come up with. Sark listened, his antennae waving softly.

“I don’t know if it’s possible,” he said. “But if it is...”

The others came bursting through the doors. They quickly climbed into the luxury airspeeder. Having already overridden the security code, Ferus pushed the engines as the first stormtroopers burst out to guard the platform. A burst of blasterfire chased them into a space lane.

Quickly Ferus dipped down into a lower space lane and dived into an express tunnel. “I’m taking you to the Crystal Forest,” he said.

As he flew, Ferus accessed the comm unit to contact Dinko and the others. Dinko’s harried voice came through the cockpit speaker.

“It’s over,” he said. Even through the crackling transmission, Ferus picked up the defeat in his voice. “After the no-confidence vote, Bog was elected—”

“What about his personal droid?” Ferus asked. “The bribery evidence—”

“Vader shut down the HoloNet,” Dinko said. “Didn’t you know? And we’ve gotten word the comm system might go down. And the ministers...we tried...Bog claimed evidence was planted during the ten minutes his droid was missing during the assassination attempt—”

“That’s ridiculous. It was in sight the whole time. I can testify to that—”

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"It doesn't matter. Bog's first ruling was to outlaw all personal droids, and he gave his own up as a gesture of solidarity with the law. They are blaming the Roshans, saying that they can infiltrate our systems through our PDs—"

The comm system began to crackle. "Get them out," Dinko said.

"What about Larker?" Ferus asked, but the comm went silent.

"It's eerie," Flame said. "Look below."

Below, the people of Sath were lining up to turn in their personal droids. Collection sites had been set up quickly, operated by Imperial stormtroopers and officers.

"This is only the first step, I'm sure. They're giving up their freedom for nothing," Robbyn Sark said. "We can't hurt them."

Sadness filled the craft as they flew through Sath.

Ferus flew past the outskirts and hugged the ground, flying low and hoping to avoid detection. The Crystal Forest rose ahead of them. In the setting sun, it flashed bloodred. Flame keyed in the coordinates to her ship.

Ferus flew through the crystal canyons, squeezing through narrow openings and speeding past incredible formations. Soon he landed next to Flame's sleek red ship.

"I'm counting on you," Ferus told her.

"I'll deliver them safely," Flame said. "And then I'm sure we'll meet again. There's lots of work to do."

The group quickly climbed out of the speeder.

"Thank you," Robbyn Sark told Ferus.

"You have the information," Ferus said. "Use it if you can. When you get back to Rosh, I'll get you in touch with the resistance here. There's someone named Firefolk who can work with you."

Sark nodded. He turned and helped his fellow delegates board Flame's ship. She ran lightly up the ramp.

Trever turned to him. "Aren't you coming?"

"No."

"But there's nothing left for you to do here."

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“I have to get Firefolk in touch with the Roshans when things settle down. And I can’t just disappear. Vader will be expecting my report.”

“But he told you to bring him the thief. He’s looking for me. If you don’t bring me to him—”

“He’s bluffing. He can’t hurt me. Not yet. The Emperor still wants me around. Trever, you have to go.”

“Why are you staying?” Trever looked at him angrily. “I don’t get it. This could be your only chance to leave, and you’re staying!”

“Trever!” Flame called. “We’ve got to go now!”

“Go,” Ferus said. “Promise me you’ll get back to the base.”

Trever held his gaze. He said nothing.

Trever turned his back and started up the ramp.

“No matter what, I’ll find you!” Ferus called.

Trever didn’t turn.

Ferus felt a wrenching in his heart, a feeling he was making a terrible mistake. He stood, watching the ship take off.

May the Force be with him.

Chapter Eighteen

Ferus sensed the change in activity as he entered Imperial headquarters. Officers rushed by. Service droids were loaded onto gravsleds. Bog Divinian had been legally elected, and now the Imperials could truly take charge.

“Ferus!”

Aaren Larker appeared, coming out of a narrow side corridor. He beckoned to Ferus, who followed him into a small meeting room.

“I was hoping I would find you.”

“I’m sorry about the vote.”

“I should have seen it coming,” Larker said bitterly. “I counted on the loyalty of those who once were my friends. And now my Roshan friend will die for my blindness.”

“Robbyn Sark is safe, I hope,” Ferus reported. “By now he should be off-planet and on his way to Rosha.”

“Thank the stars,” Larker said. “Now, I have a proposition for you. I heard that you’ve been ordered to find the thief of Bog’s droid. No doubt Vader wants you to produce anyone with ties to Rosha.”

“I can produce no one,” Ferus said.

“Yes, you can,” Larker said. “Me.”

“You didn’t steal Bog’s droid,” Ferus said.

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“So you do know who stole it.” Larker smiled. “Nonetheless, I will take the credit for it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Vader is going to turn this city upside down just to prove a point. I can’t let that happen. I can give this to my city, at least.”

“I won’t let you do it,” Ferus said. “You’ll be arrested.”

“They won’t arrest me,” Larker argued. “I may not be the prime minister any longer, but I still have enough of a following on Samaria for them to be cautious. I can claim that I was trying to find evidence of Bog’s bribes. The accusation is out there, thanks to the resistance. There will be some who’ll believe me. It’s worth a shot if I’m to keep my base of support.”

Larker put his hand on Ferus’s arm. “I’m the only one Vader will believe. And if he has an excuse to go raiding the city, you and I know he’ll use it as an excuse to locate any resistance members.”

“Vader hardly needs an excuse.”

“Sath doesn’t need any more unrest. I promise you, as long as I agree to publicly support Bog’s story, he’ll let me go. They’ve gotten exactly what they wanted.”

“I can’t let you do this,” Ferus said.

“It’s done,” Larker said, and walked out the door.

Two days later, Ferus sat in the BRT’ computer room, his head in his hands. He had just heard the news.

Aaren Larker had been arrested and charged with theft and conspiracy. He was taken to a Samarian prison. On his first day there, he was killed by a guard. Official reason: He was trying to escape.

Ferus had no doubt that Darth Vader had given the order to have him killed. Larker had underestimated Vader’s cruelty. Vader didn’t care about how it would look. All he wanted was control. Now he had it.

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Dinko had been arrested. Ferus had been unable to contact Nek or Firefolk.

He'd heard no news from Rosha. With the HoloNet down, there was no way to hear anything except through official Imperial reports, which he could not trust.

He still didn't know if the Roshan delegation had made it out of Samarian airspace, but he assumed Flame had been successful or he would have heard.

He felt a surge of sickness wash over him, and he raised his head just in time to see Darth Vader at his door. Loathing and rage surged through him.

Murderer, he thought.

"The inauguration is starting soon."

Ferus stood.

"The HoloNet is back up again," Vader said. "Perhaps you will be interested in its first broadcast."

Vader waved his gloved hand over the sensor, and the screen blazed to life.

At first, Ferus couldn't make sense of what he was seeing. Explosions. Stormtroopers rushing through an official building. But it wasn't Sath he was looking at.

The Samarian announcer spoke in triumphant tones. "The invasion of Rosha has begun. Their constant refusals to allow Samarian access to their technologies has resulted in a blow for liberty."

Smoke and fire. Devastation and destruction.

And there, a landing platform with a sleek red ship now a smoking ruin. Blown apart.

"The members of the Roshan delegation that fled Samarian jurisdiction were among the first casualties. Bog Divinian's attempted assassination has been avenged...."

The words faded against the roaring in Ferus's ears. Robbyn Sark's body, crumpled on the platform. Other bodies. Twisted metal. An outflung hand.

Trever...

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“It’s time to go,” Vader said.

Ferus put one foot in front of the other. As he did, something shattered inside him. He had failed. He had miscalculated everything. The battalion had been on alert to invade Rosha, not Samaria. He had sent the delegation and Trever straight into the midst of the fighting.

He had failed them all.

Trever huddled under a blanket. Flame crouched near a fire, warming up a protein meal she’d scrounged from somewhere. There was no power in the capital city, and the Roshans were making do where they could. Fires had sprung up in empty lots around the city and in the parks. Those who had lost their homes in the bombings had gathered what possessions they could and set up camps. So far the Empire had looked the other way.

They both wore hoods, to disguise the fact that they weren’t Roshans. Flame had cleaned her face of the smoke, and now a livid red burn marked her forehead.

He owed his life to her.

She’d dragged him from the burning transport, concealed him in a utility cart, and somehow gotten them both out of the landing platform and away from the blasterfire and the roar of the explosions. She’d made him keep walking when he didn’t want to walk. She’d found cloaks for them that concealed their burned and blackened clothing.

Someone nearby in the park had a portable vidscreen. The HoloNet news was playing. Trever turned away. This was all too familiar. The invasion. The stormtroopers. The blasting of Imperial propaganda on all vidscreens.

He’d seen it all before on Bellassa. He couldn’t bear it again. How could he bear it?

“And today, Bog Divinian took on his official duties as ruler of Samaria,” a voice boomed. “At his side were the Ministers of

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State, as well as invited guests. The Emperor sent his congratulations.”

Trever looked over. On the vidscreen he could see Bog, in a purple cape made of thick veda cloth. On one side stood Darth Vader. On the other, Ferus.

Trever froze.

“Still trust him?” Flame was standing, looking at the vidscreen, her hands gripping the tray of food.

Trever swallowed. “Sure.”

She crouched down next to him. Her eyes were vivid green underneath the red burn. It would leave a scar.

“Bog is ruler. Aaren Larker is dead. Dinko was arrested. And here, on Rosha—they knew we were coming,” she said. “They were waiting for us, Trever. It was an ambush. How did they know?”

His gaze moved from her pale face and blazing eyes back to the vidscreen.

Ferus walked through the cheering crowd. In lockstep with Darth Vader.

It was an ambush. How did they know?

Trever’s eyes burned, and it wasn’t from the smoke.

How did they know, Ferus?

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

SECRET WEAPON

BY JUDE WATSON



NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES

Chapter One

He always heard the breathing first. The disembodied rasp of the inhalation, the echoing wash of the exhale. It never failed to spook him. He'd have the sudden urge to run, to find the tiniest hole in the galaxy and crouch in it.

Not exactly a heroic response, Ferus thought, but he was no hero. That particular unpleasant fact was becoming clearer to him by the day.

And he had a feeling that even the tiniest hole in the galaxy would be found by Darth Vader and cleaned out with Vader's usual ruthless efficiency.

Instead, Ferus Olin was here—a former Jedi, a former resistance fighter, now an Imperial agent. A double agent, of course, but if he'd known how trapped he'd feel taking on that particular role, he would have stayed back in occupied Bellassa with the stormtroopers breathing down his neck. And now here he was on an Imperial ship, some sleek, powerful prototype from the Sienar yards. He didn't even know where he was going, because nobody had bothered to tell him. Nobody trusted him enough.

The door to the lounge hissed open.

"Staying out of sight, I see," Darth Vader said.

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Ferus kept his face neutral and tried not to let his nerves jangle the energy in the room. “Just enjoying the ride.”

Vader remained in the doorway, filling it with his presence, sucking the artificial light into the massive plastoid armor he wore.

Ever since Ferus had agreed to work for the Empire, he’d been an annoyance to Darth Vader. That was clear. A petty annoyance, because if he had truly challenged him, Ferus had no doubt that Lord Vader would have crushed him. So he’d gotten used to lurking beyond his vision, occasionally meeting with him, and always retreating. It was easier to stay out of sight.

There was only one flaw in this plan: Vader wasn’t going along with it. On this trip, Ferus had noticed that Vader had made a point of talking to him. He even initiated conversations. It was clear that these conversations were designed to unnerve him. The Emperor had forced Vader to bring Ferus along on this trip—Ferus had no idea why—and Vader wasn’t happy about it. Instead of ignoring Ferus, he’d decided to play with him, the way a felinx might bat around a field mouse before devouring him in one gulp.

In that breath mask, Vader’s expressions couldn’t be seen. But Ferus felt his contempt.

Ferus’s blood rose. He struggled to stay calm. Vader’s mere presence was bad enough; when Ferus felt his scorn, it inflamed the deep rage and the bitterness he felt.

Less than a week ago, Ferus had gambled, and he had lost. He had been certain that Vader was planning an invasion of Samaria, where Ferus had made contact with the resistance. Vader had outmaneuvered him. He’d invaded the neighboring planet of Rosha instead.

And Ferus had just sent his friend and companion, thirteen-year-old Trever, there.

Vader had taken particular pleasure in showing Ferus the smoking ruins of Rosha’s capital city. They’d even flown over it before they left the two-planet system. On the HoloNet, Ferus

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had seen the destroyed hulk of Trever's ship. It had been blasted to pieces.

He didn't know whether Trever was dead or alive.

And the others...his friends. Did they make it to the secret base? Was his partner Roan Lands still there, or had he returned to Bellassa? How were Astri and Lune? Ferus had helped Astri Oddo escape Samaria with her eight-year-old son. Her ex-husband, Bog Divinian, was determined to take the boy from her. Darth Vader and the Emperor had just installed Divinian as the ruler of Samaria and Rosha.

He had no way to find out if his friends were safe.

He hadn't thought that becoming a double agent would be easy. He'd been prepared for danger and the possibility of his own death. But he hadn't prepared for the loneliness.

He was in too deep. It was too dangerous to contact his friends. He was forced to wait, hoping things would improve and he'd have some freedom to remove himself from Vader's presence.

It had been a long time since he'd felt this alone. Surrounded by Imperials, Ferus missed his own life more than ever. But that gave him something to fight for.

It was his own fault he felt so marooned. He had made so many mistakes. He had turned left when he should have turned right, gone forward when he should have remained still. He had sent off Trever instead of keeping him close.

He had been chewing on the hard pieces of his remorse for several days. Time and again he almost bailed on the double agent idea and wondered if he could jump ship at the next stop. He needed to get back to Rosha. He needed to look for Trever.

Ferus knew that Vader could pick up fear and confusion, so he tried to push back all these thoughts. It was exhausting to constantly do this, but it had to be done.

Ferus heard a muffled sound coming from Darth Vader's helmet. He knew Vader was wired into the ship's comm system. No doubt he was receiving a message. Without another word, he

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turned and stalked out. In addition to being a terrifying sort of guy, Vader had no manners.

Ferus waited a moment, then followed, staying well behind. Vader turned into his private quarters. Ferus sprang back as Vader exited only a few seconds later and proceeded to a hallway near the bridge, where the pilot, an Imperial navy captain, emerged to speak to him.

Not much to see. It seemed an ordinary consultation.

Ferus was turning away when something pinged inside him, something small that he had noted unconsciously but hadn't analyzed. He was getting better at this Jedi skill—to see the tiniest detail in a picture and know when something is off.

Darth Vader's Imperial code cylinder was missing. It usually hung on his belt.

Ferus quickly made his way back to Vader's quarters. He accessed the door, which had no privacy code to lock it. Vader was probably expecting to return quickly.

The code cylinder was sitting in the dataport dock.

No doubt Vader had placed it there to update it with the new information constantly streaming through the Empire's infosphere. Each Imperial officer had one, and clearance extended upward through the ranks—the higher your rank, the higher your clearance.

Ferus had a code cylinder, too. It basically got him into the kitchen.

But Darth Vader had to have the highest clearance of all.

The possibilities thundered through Ferus's mind in the space of a moment.

If new information was being downloaded, it wouldn't have Vader's privacy lock on it yet.

The things he could learn from Vader's high clearance...

Any still-missing Jedi.

The fate of Trever.

Plans to crush the resistance.

Even a clue to Vader's true identity.

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Ferus waved his hand over the sensor and closed Darth Vader's door.

Chapter Two

Small fires flickered all over the streets of Rosha. The Empire had cut most of the power to the city to be sure it controlled the tech infrastructure. Fighting had broken out in intense battles that left more and more Roshans dead or homeless. The smoking city had lost some of its most beautiful buildings, whole neighborhoods razed by the Empire in order to stamp out rebellion and frighten the populace. The city had been pounded from the air.

Trever Flume darted through smoke and shadow underneath an eerie red sky. The taste of flight and ash was familiar to him. His own world, Bellassa, had been brutally invaded, too. At times during the last few days he'd felt he was living in his nightmares.

He had left his homeworld as a stowaway aboard Ferus Olin's escape ship. He'd been with Ferus ever since. Except for now. Now, Ferus was somewhere with the Empire. He had started out to be a double agent...but did he still remember his friends?

Trever thought about what had happened on Samaria. A politician had been imprisoned and killed. And the leader of a resistance cell had been arrested. Ferus had known both of the victims. Had he betrayed them?

Trever hated these suspicions. He'd thought Ferus was a hero. He'd worshipped him like a dumb, naïve kid. When really he'd

been on his own for long enough to know that there was no room for heroes in this galaxy. Just beings trying to get along under the Imperial boot.

Seems like Ferus had found himself a cushy gig, traveling around on Imperial transports and hobnobbing with officers and politicians. Maybe that had gotten to him. Maybe he wanted an easier life. He'd been on the run, scrounging and hustling to find materials and support and a way to get clear. Now he was sitting pretty.

Did Ferus think he was dead? There was no doubt that he'd seen the ship burning; it had been broadcast on the HoloNet. There was no way to get word to him that he was safe.

Would he care?

Or was he one of them now?

Trever could see that Flame, his new compatriot, had her doubts about Ferus's true sympathies. She was wary of him. Her doubt had fueled the wondering in Trever's own mind. Flame had taken all the considerable wealth she'd amassed as a business leader on her homeworld of Acherin and established a fund to help resistance movements around the galaxy. She called the movement Moonstrike.

Now she appeared out of the darkness, a blaster rifle held steady. She lowered it when she recognized Trever. With a jerk of her head, she indicated the way.

He followed. He'd only known her a short time, but he'd follow her anywhere. Flame's instincts were incredible, her timing flawless, and her courage remarkable. He'd seen her pilot a plane under fire and jump out into the midst of blasterfire, dragging him along, protecting him, urging him to run when he didn't think he could make it.

Without her, he'd be dead. Another casualty of the Empire.

As she slipped into a crack of a partially demolished building, Trever followed. Inside, the building was open to the sky, but the four walls offered protection. A ramp had lost most of its surface but still led up to a second story. Blasted-out windows lined one

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back wall. Trever's gaze flicked over the space with an accomplished eye. As a street thief on Bellassa, he had learned to always plan more than one exit in case of trouble.

Already a small group sat waiting. Strapped to their backs or their belts were a variety of weapons. Before the Empire invaded, Rosha had been a peaceful planet, but citizens now had scavenged arms from wherever they could find them. Their clothes were stained with smoke and dirt. Some had bandages wrapped around an arm or forehead.

Here were the beginnings of the Roshan resistance.

Flame motioned for Trever to sit next to her in the tight circle.

"No names," a tall Roshan said. His four delicate antennae were tightly curled, a signal of anxiety for a Roshan. "We're going to set up a code name system after this meeting. We're all here for the same reason." He indicated Flame. "Our visitor has assured us that we can count on help from her organization."

"You need to set up an account that I can transfer credits to," Flame said.

"We need weapons and a secure comm system," another Roshan said.

"And vehicles," someone else chimed in.

"The most important thing you need is information," Flame told them. "You have to find the right insiders to bribe. If you know what the Empire is going to do before it does it, you can plan strikes and escape routes."

Trever found his mind drifting. He knew the basics now. He'd learned plenty about how to set up a resistance. He admired how Flame sat back and didn't dominate. She waited until one of the Roshans asked a question, and she asked plenty of questions on her own.

Trever's mind drifted to Ferus again. Instead of traveling with Ferus, he was here with someone he hardly knew, seeding resistance groups from planet to planet.

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Maybe it made more sense than he'd thought. Saving Jedi wasn't his fight. But setting up resistance groups throughout the galaxy was more his speed. Maybe fate had stepped in and given him a push in the right direction.

Suddenly his father appeared in his mind. He tried not to think about his parents. Trever had attacked his grief long ago. He had spent months in a haze of agony and anger until he realized he just couldn't function if he continued to remember things. He had turned his face away from memory. He'd left his life behind and become a street thief.

Until he'd stowed aboard Ferus's starship and found himself reborn yet again.

What was he now? Trever, resistance fighter? Trever, Jedi saver? Neither of those fit.

Old friends in your heart, new friends by your shoulder. Was that it? Whatever the saying had been, his father had always pointed out that he should honor his commitments. Trever had to admit to himself now that he wished he'd been a bit more attentive to those life lessons. Well, sure, at the time he'd thought it was a whole lot of blah-blab, but now his conscience pricked him whenever he thought of stealing the ship from the secret base. Ferus had been furious.

The tall Roshan suddenly tensed. He held up a hand for silence.

"I think I hear—"

The rest of his sentence was blotted out when an explosion ripped off the entire back wall of the building.

Trever felt the explosion through a shudder of air that hit him like a fist, lifting him through the heavy air and slamming him down on the hard ground. A piece of rock pierced his shoulder. He tucked himself into a ball while debris rained down.

Before he could even form a coherent thought, he felt Flame's hand on his arm, already beginning to lead him. The air was full of dust and particles that choked him, and he could barely see, but she pulled him forward, both of them on their bellies,

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making progress on their knees and elbows while they coughed and swore, tears streaming down their faces from the smoke.

The exits he had so carefully noted were gone now, blasted into great, smoking holes in the structure. Then, when he thought things couldn't possibly get worse, stormtroopers poured through the openings.

Blasterfire streaked through the space. He heard someone shouting. He couldn't see anything. He didn't know how the others had fared. He only heard Flame panting "hurry" in his ear.

She wrenched the sleeves of her tunic over her hands—why? A moment later he got his answer.

The vent in the floor was hot, but she slid her hands underneath the smoking durasteel. As soon as he realized what she was doing, he wrapped his cloak around his fingers to help her. They heaved the heavy vent off, dropping it with a thud that was covered by the sound of cries and blasterfire.

The vent system was below, under the floor. He had looked for every exit but this one. But Flame had looked. Flame had mapped it out.

She shoved him inside, then climbed in after him. She reached out and with a tremendous heave slid the vent back into place.

There was nowhere to go. The pipe they had crawled into narrowed as it snaked underneath the floor. They crammed themselves into the tiny space and huddled together. Flame reached into her tunic and withdrew two portable breathers. She handed him one. It would help them not to cough from the smoke and give themselves away.

Directly under the floor, they could hear every word. The crunch of the stormtroopers' boots. The crackle of comlinks. A last burst of blasterfire and the muffled thud of something falling.

Someone falling.

"Dead." The electronic mask-voice of a stormtrooper.

"Haul that one up."

A cry and a scuffle.

“Where did the others go?”

Silence.

“Where?”

Another muffled cry.

“Kill him.”

Trever put his hands over his ears like a kid, a poor scared kid. That’s what he felt like.

He didn’t want to hear. He didn’t want to know.

Time passed. It was dark now. The noises had stopped some time ago.

Flame lightly patted his knee. “It’s time.”

She eased the vent off above them. She climbed out, then reached for his hand. “All clear.”

His muscles were stiff, and his legs barely worked as she pulled him up and out. He collapsed on the floor next to her, then rubbed his legs and arms, trying to restore circulation.

Around them the ruins rose, blocks of stone hurled whole meters, crumbled stones, dirt, the tiled floor now pockmarked and stained. Trever looked away from the fresh stains. Hearing the battle was enough. He didn’t want to keep thinking about the details.

“Some of them got away,” Flame said. “But I don’t think it’s safe to contact the resistance again, not for a while. There was an informer. Someone who didn’t get to the meeting at the last minute, I’ll bet, or someone who got away.”

“Who?”

She shrugged as she lifted her thick hair off her neck. “Their problem.”

“We’re here to help them.”

Her green crystal eyes bored into him. “Trev, you’ve got to learn something. You have to choose your battles. I’ve got a bigger one to fight. I’ll come back when the Roshans are more organized. I’ve got other places to go.”

Jude Watson

He ran his hands through his hair. His hands came back streaked with gray dust. “Where?”

“Bellassa, for a start. It’s your homeworld, so you can help me. You know the Eleven.”

“Well, at least nine of them,” Trever tried to joke.

Flame ignored that. If she had a flaw, it was a complete lack of humor. “Bellassa’s successes in forming and maintaining a resistance are starting to get known,” Flame continued. “I need the Bellassans to be the anchor for the new network—an inspiration for the galaxy. What do you say?”

Home. The word rose in him, and it had weight and shape. It filled him up.

“Yes,” Trever said. “But on one condition.”

She frowned. “I don’t do conditions.”

“I need to go on my own little side trip first. I can’t bring you with me.”

She raised one eyebrow at him.

“But there’s one thing I need help with.”

“What?” she asked warily.

“I need to steal a ship.”

For a moment, she looked angry. She wasn’t the type to take someone bailing out on her easily. But then she shrugged.

“Tell you what,” she said. “Stealing one would be too much of a risk. There are lots of desperate Roshans here who need credits. We’ll buy one.”

“Hey, I could get used to this,” Trever said, realizing it never hurt to have a friend with money.

Chapter Three

It's not that he didn't like kids, Clive Flax reflected. He just never noticed them. They were background in the cities he visited, registering as a flash of movement in a park, or an irritating spill of juice on his trousers if he made the mistake of sitting next to one in a diner. It wasn't like he ever wanted to interact with one.

Now here he was, stuck on a constantly traveling asteroid in the middle of an atmospheric storm that turned the sky to gray to purple to navy, and he was trapped with a bunch of mates he didn't know very well. And a kid.

Lune Oddo was eight years old. At first Clive had left him to the others to watch. But he'd been eyeballing this kid for over a week now, and he had to admit he was entertaining. Opinions, questions, and a certain look in his eye, a quietness that Clive associated with his pal Ferus—was that a Force thing? You got the sense that they could hang you with your own words, so you thought twice before you said you could do something you couldn't, or boasted about something you hadn't really done.

Not that Clive himself did that. Much.

Well, whatever the quality was, it could unnerve a guy. He'd accepted Ferus because the man had saved his life on a number of occasions. Besides, Clive liked him. Despite the whole Jedi

Jude Watson

hoo-ha, Ferus sometimes just didn't have a clue, and he wasn't afraid to admit it. But this Lune...it was hard to remember he was just a kid.

Imagine, Clive thought, *a whole Temple full of these kids?* He was lucky he hadn't met Ferus until after he'd left the Jedi. All that moral rectitude would have sent him straight to the nearest cantina.

He watched the boy now as he flipped a laserball around the barren landscape. It would have been a normal-looking scene, if the kid hadn't been doing it with just his mind. Garen Muln, who was as weak as a kitten and couldn't do much, had been working with him. Garen had been some big Jedi Master back before the galaxy had been flattened by the Empire. Now he was more shadow than man.

Clive leaned back on his elbows. He'd been working since before dawn...not that there was dawn on this bloody rock. He was beat. Time to catch forty winks before the others arrived for the food break they always took around this time.

He started to close his eyes, but the sight of Astri Oddo exiting one of the prefab plastoid structures stopped him. He kept his eyelids half closed, pretending to be napping while he watched her shake back the springy, dark hair that could never stay confined in a cap or headband. Then she did a long stretch, hands in the air and up on her toes. She'd been working hard on the computer system here at the base. Things had fallen apart once Ferus had left, and now they were all pitching in, working on tasks that never seemed to end, working until they fell onto their sleep mats and crashed into uneasy slumber.

Astri was a puzzle. On the run from some idiot ex-husband, easy with her smiles, and quick to lend a hand...but with something dark and sad inside. Clive couldn't charm her, which annoyed him. After a few tries, he'd taken to watching her instead.

Astri watched Lune for a moment, smiling, then leaned down and snatched up a small rock. Suddenly, with surprising accuracy,

she winged it through the air toward Clive without even looking at him. Just in time, he lifted a booted foot to deflect it before it hit him.

“Hey!” he cried.

She grinned, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her dirty coveralls. “Stop pretending to be asleep. I won’t bother you.”

“What do you call chucking a rock at my head?”

She came toward him and sat down next to him on the hard ground. “Saying hello.”

He grunted.

“And if I were aiming at your head, I would have hit your head.”

He sat up. Together, they watched Lune for a moment.

“We’ve been on this asteroid too long,” Clive said. “It’s starting to get to all of us.”

“Not me,” Astri said, tucking her knees up under her chin. “I’m in no hurry. I feel safe here.”

He knew what she was really saying. *Lune is safe here.*

“Safe isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It’s no way for a boy to grow up,” Clive said. “Hanging around with a scruffy bunch of outsiders.”

“It’s not so bad,” Astri said, but she frowned.

“It’s not gleaming good, either,” Clive observed. “You know, the galaxy is a big place. Lots of places to hide.”

“You should know.”

Before he could reply, Oryon suddenly appeared behind them. Despite being a big Bothan, he had an irritatingly soft tread. Clive figured it came in handy in the spy business.

“I agree.” Oryon looked very serious. On the asteroid, he had let his beard and his tangle of hair grow wild. “I’ve been thinking about Lune,” he said to Astri. “At this point, Coruscant might be a good option for you.”

“Are you crazy?” Astri asked. “Go to the seat of the Empire?”

“They’re having trouble monitoring the levels,” Oryon said. “It’s impossible for them to crack down completely. And Dexter

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Jettster has a good setup. I'm sure he'd offer you help. He could find you a place to go. Get you a new identity."

"That is, if we can ever blast off from here," Clive reminded the Bothan. Then he turned to Astri with a slight flourish of a half-bow and said, "If by any chance Ferus and Trever ever remember that we're still alive, I'd be glad to escort you and Lune to Coruscant."

Astri bristled. "I don't need an escort. I know how to get to Coruscant."

"You shouldn't be so quick to turn down help these days," Oryon advised. "We can all use it."

Suddenly Astri looked at her utility belt. A sensor flashed. "Our airspace has been invaded," she muttered.

"At last, somebody's remembered we're here," Clive said.

She began punching numbers into her datapad. "I linked the security system to a remote so that..." She looked up, her face white. "Lune! Come here now!" She turned to the others. "It's an Imperial ship."

Immediately, Oryon spoke into his wrist comlink. "Code red alert, weapons and front-line defense."

Solace burst out of the shelter, a blaster in her hand. "What is it?"

"Imperial ship," Oryon said.

Nobody needed to give an order. Within moments, Astri whisked Lune to his hiding place. Solace and Oryon positioned themselves behind two large boulders near the only flat area close to the camp, the place a ship would no doubt land. Clive, Astri, Roan Lands, and Dona split up into teams and flanked them. Toma and Raina remained as a last line of defense inside the first shelter. Everyone was armed with blaster rifles, alpha charges, and grenades.

Solace spoke softly into her comlink. "Everyone in position?"

They all checked in with a quick affirmative.

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Clive looked up. Within moments, he saw the silver streak against the dark purple of the atmosphere. The ship wobbled crazily. They all knew how turbulent the inner atmosphere was.

The ship righted itself. It was an Imperial ship all right, a modified Sienar starship. Clive kept his finger on the trigger of his blaster. If they were lucky, the Imperials wouldn't come up fighting. The group here had worked to create an impression of an abandoned base. The idea was to lure the Imperials in and then attack.

"Hold your fire." Solace's voice was soft from the comlink speaker.

The ship executed a wobbly landing. Nothing happened for a moment. Clive couldn't see through the windscreen into the cockpit.

The ramp slid down. His finger cramped, but he didn't move it.

Then a miniature model of a Vulture droid fighter zoomed out, did a lazy twirl, and eased onto a landing on the dirt.

"Could be a trick," Oryon muttered.

A slight figure with blue hair poked his head out from behind the shell of the ship. "Don't shoot!" Trever said. "I brought presents!"

Clive leaped across the rock. He couldn't wait to wrap his hands around the kid's scrawny neck. Trever's eyes widened and he bolted. Clive chased him around the ship, but the kid was faster than a dinko.

"Hey! I came back!" Trever shouted.

"So I can kill you," Clive replied evenly.

Suddenly Solace did one of those show-offy Force-assisted leaps and landed in between them. She held up a hand. "Stop."

Clive stopped. He learned to have a healthy respect for anyone in possession of a lightsaber, even an unclipped one. He'd seen how fast those things could come out.

"Whew. Thanks, Solace," Trever said.

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She turned with such vehemence that Trever backed up a step. An inflamed Solace was a scary sight. The small blue facial marking over her eyebrow deepened, and her pale blue eyes blazed in her gaunt face.

“You sneaked away. You stole a ship. You went against the group.” Solace’s tone was furious.

“But I was trying to save Ferus!”

“We all wanted to save Ferus,” Solace said. “It was not your decision to make.”

The others gathered, all forming a circle around Trever.

“I came back,” he said in a faint voice. “And look at the ship! Flame bought it and let me take it, can you believe that? It’s a good ship, real fast, handles like a dream—”

“You aren’t a used-starship salesman,” Oryon said to him. “You pledged your support to this group. That means you have to follow the rules.”

“I hate rules,” Trever said.

Raina crossed her arms. “You put us in danger.”

“You left us here without transport,” Toma said.

“I know all that,” Trever said. “And I’m sorry I did it, believe me. Especially since things...well, they didn’t work out quite the way I thought they would.”

Dona held up a broad hand before anyone could speak. “Why don’t we all calm down and let the boy talk. He seems to have a story to tell.”

Clive backed away. He hadn’t really wanted to kill Trever anyway. Just to scare him. Or maim him.

Trever sat uneasily on a stool inside the shelter. Confronting this many disapproving faces wasn’t easy. As a former street thief, he was used to taking off when things became hostile. It wasn’t exactly a day in the space park when you had to stay and take it.

“Things went okay at first,” he said. “I mean, I crashed the ship when I landed on Samaria, but at least it was around the correct coordinates. And it was an old rust bucket anyway.” He

looked at them uneasily. “Anyway, that’s where I met up with Flame. Of course she was in the middle of being chased by stormtroopers, but we managed to lose them. It was so totally galactic; I was up on this crystal formation thing, and she flew underneath—”

Roan dropped his head in his hands. Oryon groaned.

“You were supposed to sneak in without attracting attention,” Raina said.

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, then we contacted the resistance. And I met up with Ferus. He wasn’t too happy about seeing me but did agree to take Flame’s message about Moonstrike to the resistance.”

Solace leaned forward. “What did he think of Moonstrike?”

“Well, he thought it was a pretty good idea,” Trevor said. “But he didn’t want to get involved. He thought it would expose the Jedi.”

Solace nodded. “Exactly what I think.”

Trever felt annoyed. “Yeah, I get that it’s in the Jedi handbook,” he said. “But you should see Flame. She’s full-moon amazing.”

“What happened next?” Roan asked. “Where is Ferus?”

“I’m not sure,” Trevor said. “He sent me and Flame to Roshana to escort the Roshana delegation. Our ship was attacked as soon as we entered Roshana airspace. Everyone else died. The last time I saw Ferus was on the HoloNet. Standing next to Darth Vader.”

“So he’s still a double agent,” Oryon said.

“I guess so,” Trevor answered. Solace gave him a sharp look. “Anyway, I have to get back to Flame. I promised her I’d return the ship. We’re going to Bellassa.”

“We?” Solace asked.

“Bellassa?” Roan asked.

“She wants to talk to the Eleven about joining up with Moonstrike. She’s ready to fund their attacks on the Empire if they’re interested. Hey, Roan, you’re one of the Eleven—what do you think?”

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"It's worth considering," Roan said. "I'm ready to return. Dona?"

"I'm ready," she said.

"I'm more than ready," Clive said. "I'm heading to Coruscant." He looked over at Astri. She bit her lip, trying to decide.

"Lune and I will come, too," she finally said.

"I'll remain here for the time being," Oryon said. "Toma and Raina still need help."

"I'm going back to Coruscant," Solace said. Everyone looked at her. "I never agreed to the idea of a secret base," she said. "I didn't promise Ferus that I'd stay. Commitment makes me itchy."

Clive jumped up. "Well, if we're going, we've got things to arrange."

The others moved out to gather their things. Solace remained. Her eyes were on Trever, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"What is it that you're not saying?" she asked.

"After we left Samaria, Darth Vader raided the resistance cell," he said. "The leader was arrested. Not only that, the ruler of Samaria was arrested and killed. And when we entered Roshan airspace, it was like they were waiting for us...."

"What are you saying, Trever?" Solace asked quietly.

"What if Ferus is one of them now?" Trever burst out. "What if he betrayed us?"

He looked down at his clasped hands. "I hate saying it. I hate even thinking it. But all those coincidences...I know you're going to say it's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," Solace said in her usual blunt way. "Ferus is struggling with his Force connection. That makes him vulnerable. But..."

Trever waited, hanging. Solace was brusque and short-tempered. He wasn't sure how much he liked her, but he knew he depended on her. He valued her opinion. She didn't factor in prejudice or emotion.

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“I trust him,” she said.

The relief that filled him wasn’t enough to quiet his doubts. But it felt good, all the same.

He went off to the galley section of the pod to grab some grub. It wasn’t until he had eaten his fill and headed back that he saw that she was still in the same position. Still thinking.

Chapter Four

Ferus felt sweat spring out on his neck as he sat at Darth Vader's console. Updating a code cylinder took only seconds, so the dark figure could return for his at any time.

Ferus couldn't load information on his own dataport and crack it later. The files would be scrambled into complete garbage if he did. He could only flip through the files that had been downloaded in the recent updating. Most likely some of them would need passwords to actually read the contents. He'd have to see what he could glean and then commit it to memory.

He removed the code cylinder from the dock and stationed himself by the door. He'd be able to hear Vader's footsteps from here.

He set the cylinder to holo-mode and flashed through the datafiles, concentrating on those with Vader's high clearance. As a Jedi, he had been trained in information retention, but he was rusty. He tried to make the flow of information distinct in his brain and not a blur.

But Imperialization *was* a blur. Planets to be whipped into shape, rulers to intimidate, alliances to smash, a new agreement with Sienar Fleet Systems...but nothing helpful. Nothing he could use.

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The information on Rosha didn't demand a privacy code. He flipped through it. A watch list, a raid that captured the early leader of the resistance, scientists to be put under surveillance, an accounting of government wealth. Standard stuff. Nothing about Trever.

But here. Ferus moved on to the files already on the cylinder. Vader's private files. They were under a security lock. They didn't even have titles. They were the ones he needed to see.

Ferus was an expert code breaker. He expected this code to be tough, but it was tougher than anything he'd seen. Just when he thought he'd solved it, he realized he was still left with gibberish.

He couldn't risk the time it would take to break it. Frustrated, he pounded his fist on the arm of his chair. Time was running out.

Desperately, Ferus took one last race through the codes.

He almost missed it. It would have been easy to. One title of one file was uncoded, even though the file itself was hidden behind walls of coding.

TWILIGHT.

Along with the title was a brief description. LSO. Ferus knew from his short time in the Empire that this stood for Large Scale Operation. Order 66 had been a LSO. The subheading was *Planning/Implementation/Contacts.*

Then he heard the sound that always chilled him. But this time it stopped his heart.

Breathing.

Close. Too close. Vader was right outside the door.

Ferus's command of the Force was growing all the time. He just hated to have to rely on it.

He had no choice.

Ferus sent the code cylinder into the air as he threw himself into a chair. Using the Force, it sailed across the chamber and slid into the dock just as the door hissed open and Darth Vader walked in.

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“To what do I owe this intrusion?” he asked.

“The door was open, so I made myself at home,” Ferus said, lounging in the chair. “I’m getting bored. I thought I’d pop by and see if you received my orders yet.”

“You are a petulant child,” Vader said.

He stood silently for a moment. Had Vader seen? He didn’t think so. Did he suspect something? Definitely.

“But in this case,” Vader finally said, “you will get your wish. The Emperor wishes your presence in the conference room.”

Vader picked up the code cylinder and slipped it into his utility belt. Ferus found he was able to breathe again. He followed Vader back down the hallway to the conference room. The door slid shut behind them and the light turned red, indicating that a secure communication would take place.

The hologram of the Emperor had a purplish cast, the color of a bruise.

“Here are your orders,” the Emperor said. “You are to proceed to Bellassa.”

“Bellassa?” Ferus couldn’t stop from blurting out the word. Of all the places in the galaxy, he hadn’t expected to be sent back to his homeworld.

“Lord Vader needs assistance,” the Emperor said. “The Empire finds itself in need of Bellassan expertise. They are to shift their factories from the production of luxury goods to communications and infrastructure technologies. This will be of benefit to them as well. Their economy is stagnating, and we will offer a needed boost. We’re importing scientists as well.”

Their economy is in trouble because of your invasion, Ferus thought angrily. This was one of the difficult problems of being a double agent—keeping your facial expressions neutral.

“You will attend various meetings,” the Emperor went on, “covered by the HoloNet and broadcast throughout Bellassa, in which the factory overhaul will be discussed. Naturally, we want to focus on the creation of jobs and new technologies.”

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Of course, Ferus thought. Now he understood. He was being sent to his homeworld to sell this project to his fellow Bellassans. His very presence would be used as a club to batter Bellassans into submission. He was the former resistance hero who had thrown his support to the Empire. He would be the poster boy for collaboration and surrender.

It turned his stomach. Everyone would see him. Everyone would despise him. He didn't know if he had the power to make anyone lose hope, but even the possibility of that sickened him.

But he couldn't back out. He had to do it. Now more than ever. He didn't know what Twilight was. But he knew that the Empire was planning to strike against a large, spread-out target...so he had to find out what the target was, and when the attack was planned.

Then he had to return to Rosha and find Trever...which he wouldn't be able to do if he defied the Emperor now.

Suddenly the comm unit crackled.

"I left orders not to be disturbed!" Darth Vader's voice was like a laserwhip.

"Lord Vader, we have starfighters on our radar not registered to the Bellassan government," the captain said. "Possible members of the resistance."

"I'll come up to the bridge," Vader said.

"It appears you are needed," the Emperor said. "You both have your orders."

The hologram faded. Obviously the Emperor was not concerned about the ships. He knew Lord Vader could handle it.

Curious, Ferus hurried after Vader.

Vader strode onto the bridge and went to stand behind the captain's chair.

"They haven't identified themselves," the captain reported.

"Are we in Bellassan airspace?"

"Just approaching the inner atmosphere, sir."

Ferus looked at the radar, and then out the cockpit window for a visual sighting. Suddenly the two tiny points of light moved

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toward them, and he saw that they were battered V-wing starfighters, left over from the Clone Wars.

“Blast them,” Vader said.

“They haven’t shot at us,” the captain said. “They’re probably just doing surveillance.”

“I gave you an order, Captain,” Vader said.

NO! Ferus wanted to shout. Those starfighters could well be staffed by someone he knew, some member of the Eleven.

Fire from the laser cannons streaked into the atmosphere. The first ship dived and rolled, trying to evade the locked-on firepower.

You can do it, just heel it over to starboard and push those engines...come on, come on...

The ship disappeared. Vapor.

The second ship heeled around.

“Look at him squirm!” One of the lesser officers made the comment. Vader looked over, and the officer paled.

The captain dived, the big ship moving easily, almost gracefully.

The second laser cannon sent off an energy bolt.

Pull up, pull up! Ferus felt the cry inside him.

The second ship was blasted into space dust.

Vader turned away. As he did, he spoke to the captain in a low voice. “I want that officer off this ship when we reach Bellassa and assigned to the nearest penal colony. Emotion has no place on a starship bridge.”

Ferus continued to stare out into space. Had he known them, those two pilots, brave enough to risk attacking a ship belonging to the Empire? He might have. He’d known most of the members of the resistance. If he didn’t know them personally, he most likely knew their friends. Their wives or husbands. Their parents.

His helplessness made his hands shake. He swallowed against the sour taste in his mouth.

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Bellassa grew in his vision, and he could make out the mountain range, the forests, and then the great city of Ussa rising from the surrounding plains.

By simply traveling with the Empire, was he harming his beloved homeworld? Where did his true duty lie?

Was he about to attempt to save his world, or would he betray it?

Chapter Five

Darth Vader returned to the conference room. His Master came through immediately. Palpatine didn't even ask if the situation with the unidentified ships had been taken care of, or how. He just assumed that what needed to be done would be done. Vader appreciated that. For two beings who did not believe in trust, it was as close as they could come.

"Ferus Olin is the key to breaking the back of Bellassa," his Master continued as though there had been no interruption. "That world has proven difficult to subdue. Other systems are beginning to take note of their successes."

"The planet has become an inspiration for many resistance movements," Vader agreed. "It must be crushed."

"Your plan is a good one," the Emperor said. "We will destroy the resistance at the same time we move forward on the project. There is so much yet to be done. Years of planning. The new weapon will require more hardware, more ships, more weaponry. Governor Tarkin has coordinated the effort and will assist you."

Vader nodded. "I have assembled a team of the best scientists from around the galaxy. Those who did not want to work with us have been persuaded."

"Good. Now, let's move on. Twilight?"

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“Progress has been slow, but lately there has been movement. I have complete confidence in our operative. And our eventual victory.”

“Excellent.”

“We are approaching Bellassa now, my Master.”

“Ferus Olin...you must work with him. Keep him close, for just a little while longer. We can use him.”

“It is dangerous to keep him close. He’s not stupid. I caught him in my stateroom.”

“Did he find anything?”

“Of course not, Master.”

“Then why should we care? He will discover nothing of consequence.”

“But after Bellassa?” Vader ventured the question. How long would this maddening protection of Ferus last? He knew there was more behind the Emperor’s use of Ferus than there seemed to be. Vader was ready to get rid of him for good. Ferus was an irritant.

“I shall revisit the situation,” the Emperor said.

A highly unsatisfactory answer. But Darth Vader did not question his Master.

It didn’t matter anyway. He promised himself that he would find a way to get rid of Ferus Olin on Bellassa.

That would be satisfactory.

Chapter Six

They had learned to choose busy space stations in tiny corners of the galaxy, where spaceliners and freighters docked. On the planet of Omman, the crush of vehicles and passengers meant that controls were difficult to maintain. The Empire had not yet completely perfected its check-in systems. Trever had no doubt that it would. Just not yet.

Their fake ID docs passed muster. They were checked through without a challenge and made their way to the smoky cantina.

Trever saw Flame sitting in a corner, her back to the wall, one foot up on a chair in front of her. He was startled by her appearance. He had left her on Rosha in stained coveralls, her dark hair filmed with dust and her skin reddened and windblown. Now she was dressed all in white, lounging elegantly at the table, her dark hair smooth and shining in a coil at the back of her head.

She was all business as she pushed a chair toward him with one booted foot. "Have a seat and introduce me to your friends."

Trever noted that Clive's gaze lingered on Flame for a long moment, puzzlement in his eyes. After Trever introduced Clive, Astri, Lune, and Roan and Dona, Clive turned to Flame.

"I think we've met before," he said.

Flame gave him a cool look. "Is that your standard line?"

"I hope I'm not that uninspired."

Solace snorted.

"I wouldn't know," Flame said. Her frosty tone told Clive that she wasn't in the mood for banter.

"Let's get down to business," Trever said. He was anxious that they all get along. One trouble with the group he traveled with was that they were all such *personalities*. He turned to Flame. "Roan is one of the founding members of the Eleven. Dona is also a member of the resistance. They'll come with us to Bellassa."

"Good. Do you have an entry point?" Flame asked. "I was thinking of landing in the mountains and taking airspeeders into Ussa."

"That used to be a route. No more," Dona said. "The Empire has patrols all through the mountains now, thick as the yarrowfew flowers in spring."

"I have a way, but it will take some tricky piloting," Roan said. "The Empire has shut down Ussa, but it's difficult to maintain patrols in the forested area south of the city."

"The Tanglewoods?" Flame asked. "But that's unnavigable."

"There's a way," Roan said.

"What about the rest of you?" Flame asked.

"We're going to catch a spaceliner to Coruscant," Astri said.

Clive was leaning back against the wall, holding in his hands a cup of bright blue juice that he hadn't tasted. "Any advice there? We haven't been in some time."

Flame shook her head. "Tight controls on all entry points. Your ID docs better be perfect."

"Do you have a favorite landing hangar?" Clive asked.

She shook her head. "Haven't been to Imperial City. Not even before the Clone Wars. I don't like crowded planets."

"Well, we're off," Solace said, standing. "The spaceliner is boarding."

"I'll go do the preflight check with Flame," Trever said.

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They all pushed back their chairs. It was the moment of parting, and no one knew what to say.

Trever was suddenly filled with foreboding. Parting with friends was so different now. He didn't know when he'd see them again. If he'd ever see them again.

"Curran Caladian told me that the Svivreni never say good-bye," Solace said gruffly. "They just say, 'The journey begins, so go.'"

Trever looked each of them in the eye, holding the gaze. "So go."

"So go, kid," Clive said.

Then Lune shouted, "So go, Trever!" making them all laugh.

Astri, Lune, Solace, and Clive headed to the departure gate. Roan and Dona went with Trever and Flame to the private vehicle departure hangar.

They boarded, and Flame automatically slid behind the controls. Roan raised an eyebrow at her.

"She's a great pilot," Trever told him. "I trust her."

Roan waved a hand. "Carry on." He settled himself behind the nav computer. "I'll plot the route."

The ship was cleared for takeoff and shot out into the atmosphere.

They didn't speak much on the way to Bellassa. What lay ahead was so uncertain and dangerous that it was hard to think about anything else.

Trever found himself wondering again about Ferus. It seemed so strange now, as if he'd substituted Flame for Ferus. Events came rushing at him like a jump into hyperspace, and he didn't have time to think anything through. It was reassuring to be with Roan, at least, someone he knew and trusted. Someone who connected him to his past.

And now he was flying right into it.

It was a long day's journey before Roan quietly announced that they were approaching Bellassan airspace. They would enter the planet's atmosphere well away from Ussa, over the

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wastelands on the other side of the planet. Then they would come up from the south.

Suddenly, alarms rang throughout the cabin.

“Imperial ships ringing the docking stations,” Roan said crisply. “Evasive action!”

Chapter Seven

The ship went into a screaming corkscrew dive, and Trever held on. It shouldn't be this hard just to get home again. Once again, he had the sensation that the galaxy was upside down. Just as he was, at the moment.

The ship leveled out, and they all took a breath.

"Out of radar range," Roan reported. "But we're going to have to go back in again if we want to land. Usually the patrols are more random and centered around the landing platforms near Ussa. They never had large Star Destroyers lurking out here before."

Flame turned the ship and lessened the speed. "What now?"

"I've got a large freighter cleared to land at the Ussa spaceport," Roan said, monitoring air traffic. "It's got to come in from the south. If you could hug its flank, we might pass through the detection scan. Then peel off when we're close to the surface."

"Got it," Flame said.

Flame turned the ship into a quick dive, then flew in a random pattern toward the freighter. She quickly dipped the ship down, heading for the stern of the freighter.

"We're going to catch a few space disturbance waves from displacement as we get closer," she said. "So hang on."

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Suddenly the ship lurched, and Flame had to pull back to avoid smashing into the freighter. As winds whipped around their craft, sending it left and right and hurling it toward the large freighter, Flame was able to keep the ship steady, only meters from the freighter's exhaust.

"The ship will blow out the exhaust soon," Roan advised.

"I'm ready. It'll be a good time to dive."

The exhaust blew, and the ship rocketed backward. Flame lost control for a split second, and the ship spun so quickly that Trever almost fell to the floor. He was beginning to feel dizzy. Flame quickly leveled out, then dived toward the surface.

"Didn't expect that to be quite so...aggressive," she said with a grin.

"All right, we're beyond their sensors," Roan said, watching the computer. "No sign that they've seen us. I think we made it past the checkpoint."

Flame's hands relaxed slightly on the controls.

Sunset spread out below them in streaks of hot orange and deep red. Their craft zoomed downward.

Suddenly the Tanglewoods loomed ahead. The forest was renowned on Bellasa. The towering trees shared a complex root system and grew so thickly together that their branches intertwined in fantastical shapes. There was not a sliver of space to be seen between them. The darkness was falling rapidly. Only streaks of color remained near the horizon. Flame's hands tightened on the controls.

"This is impossible," she muttered.

"It only seems so," Roan said. "Trust me. Follow the coordinates I laid out. Don't trust your eyes."

"Okay," Flame said, her voice a bit shaky, "but we're about to crash into that tree."

Trever shrank back in his seat. The massive trunk loomed ahead. Flame kept going.

Jude Watson

The ship burst through a holographic scrim. Now ahead through the gloom they could just make out a narrow, twisting tunnel through the entwined branches of the trees.

“The resistance worked for weeks to get this set up,” Roan said, leaning forward. “First we set up the hologram, then we cleared a path through the trees. The Empire hasn’t discovered it yet, and we hope they never do. It’s a safe pathway to Ussa.”

Confident now, Flame powered down the speed and looped through the twisting tunnel. It was now completely dark, and the trees overhead made only a whispering noise as they slipped through.

“We can leave the ship at the edge of the wood,” Roan said. “It’s a short hike to Ussa.”

“This looks good,” Flame said, easing the ship down into a clearing surrounded by a thickly tangled canopy of trees.

“No survival packs,” Roan warned. “We have to look like residents of the city.”

For a time they walked through the forest, which gradually thinned until they could make out twinkling lights in the distance.

Gradually they heard the hum and whoosh of air traffic, and they knew they were close. They walked parallel to the main road.

“Up ahead is the airbus stop,” Roan told them. “Dona and I will bring Flame’s credentials to the Eleven. We’ll contact you when there’s word. Are you coming with us, Trever?”

“I’ll stick with Flame for now,” Trever said. “I’ve still got my buddies in the black market. They’ll hide us for sure.”

Roan nodded. “Good luck. Dona and I will continue on foot.”

Trever and Flame stepped out onto the road. The lights of Ussa were just a kilometer or so ahead. The airbus stop was crowded. This was where those who lived outside the city either left their personal transports or stepped off the interplanetary liners to get to the city airbuses. There was a small landing area crowded with swoops and speeders. Trever and Flame joined the

short line forming to wait for the next airbus. A soft rain began to fall.

I'm home, Trevor thought.

The airbus arrived and they boarded. No one gave them a second look. They stood near the rear doors. The airbus glided through the winding city streets. Outlanders often got lost in Ussa, since it was a city built around seven lakes, and roads were circular and twisted around each other in dizzying arcs.

More people got on and off. The passengers began to dwindle as the airbus reached the Moonstone District, which was made up of warehouses and power plants for the city. Trever nudged Flame, and they jumped off.

"Not much to see around here," Flame observed.

"We like it that way."

Trever had exited the airbus two stops away from his destination, just to be sure the approach was safe. He led Flame through the dark streets and down an alley. At the alley's end, he pushed open a door to what seemed to be an empty, abandoned warehouse. Inside, however, there was light and activity. A makeshift city had been set up within the warehouse's four walls. Tents had been pitched, temporary structures thrown up, black market goods catalogued and stored in durasteel bins. As Trever walked in, all eyes turned to him. A tall, muscled man, with a heavy beard and a chest holster filled with small but deadly vibroshivs, stood up. Flame tensed.

The menacing man threw open his arms. "We thought you were dead!" he bellowed. "C'mere, you black-hearted scampweasel!"

Abashed, Trever walked through applauding thieves and claps on the back to the man, who lifted him off the ground and squeezed him in a bear hug that almost knocked every trace of breath from Trever's body.

Trever pounded on the man's shoulders to release him. "Glad to see you, too, Ptor," he choked out.

Jude Watson

Ptor dumped him down on the floor and gave his head a pat. "I'll get a tarp for you and your friend so you can stake out a patch of floor. Plenty of food to go round, too."

Trever took the tarp that Ptor tossed him, and Flame helped him spread it on the ground. "When I first started living on the street, Ptor watched out for me," he told Flame.

"Seems like a good guy to have watching your back," she observed.

"Sure helped the transition," he agreed.

Someone had set up a large holoscreen, hanging from the ceiling. It was broadcasting Imperial Holovision. Ptor looked over and his face darkened. "Only thing we can get on Bellassa now. Still, they promised to broadcast some archives of the Galactic Games tonight. They're good for something, I guess."

Suddenly Darth Vader filled the screen. The room slowly quieted as the commentator's voice came through.

"Lord Vader has been specially appointed as the Imperial liaison to the Bellassan drive to convert all factories to productive ends. The crash of the Bellassan economy has been a personal concern of the Emperor...."

Darth Vader was shown standing in a room, surrounded by men and women in somber tunics.

"...gathered the best and the brightest of human scientists in the galaxy..."

"What's the matter with the rest of us?" someone called out from the back, a Dornean, a Bellassan immigrant.

"The Empire doesn't like other species," Flame muttered. "They're starting to fill all staff positions with humans."

Suddenly Trever froze. Up on the screen was Ferus. He was in Ussa.

The room fell completely silent.

"...has called upon the Bellassan hero Ferus Olin for assistance. Ferus Olin has pledged his own considerable energies to the task of retooling Bellassan factories and bringing new life to the planet's economy...."

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Suddenly the room erupted in jeers and boos. Someone threw something at the screen. “Traitor!” someone shouted. The word was taken up until it made the walls shake.

Traitor! Monkey-lizard!

Ptor spit on the ground.

“I wouldn’t think a group of thieves and black marketers would care so much about politics,” Flame murmured.

Trever looked around the room. “All Bellassans care about politics,” he said.

He felt the contempt in the room. He looked up at Ferus again.

Betrayal. How could Ferus do this? Even as a double agent? He had been an inspiration. Now he was the worst of the worst. A traitor.

Chapter Eight

The Orange District on Coruscant had deteriorated even further. It seemed to contain more lowlifes, more menace, and more debris. It seemed more dangerous, more seedy, and more...

"Orange?" Clive wondered aloud. "It's been awhile since I've been here, but it was never this orange."

Solace strode a half step ahead, as she usually did, her eyes constantly moving, checking for trouble. "The Empire has left it alone, so it's just gotten worse."

"That's good for us," Astri said. She had a grip on Lune's hand. She hadn't let go since they'd left the air taxi.

"Yes and no," Solace said. "They won't let it alone for long. They can't afford to be seen as weak. And Ferus told us that their ambition is to control Coruscant all the way down to the crust. If that's their ambition, they'll follow through."

"Maybe Coruscant wasn't such a good idea," Astri said, shooting an annoyed glance at Clive. He pretended not to see it.

"No, it's the best place for now," Solace said. "Dex has a good setup. And he keeps his ear close to the ground. When it's time to move, he'll be ready. The asteroid was no place for Lune. And he's the most important thing."

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Astri and Clive exchanged a surprised look. It seemed so out of character for Solace to demonstrate concern for a child. Astri hadn't even been sure that Solace remembered her son's name.

Or maybe Solace only cared about him because he was Force-adept.

Clive grinned at Astri, and she ducked her head before he saw her answering smile. She was still trying to sort out if she liked him. She certainly didn't trust him. According to Trever, Clive had been something of a con man before the Clone Wars, despite all his boasts about being an industrial spy for the good guys—whoever they were. As a slicer, Astri hadn't always been on the proper side of the law, either, but she'd been on the run from a nasty ex-husband and had her reasons.

The last thing she needed in her life was another smooth-talking charlatan. She'd made the mistake of marrying one once. Bog Divinian had swept her off her feet—straight into a life of misery. All Bog cared about was climbing the ladder to political power, and once he'd gotten a taste of success, he did anything to keep it. He prided himself on loyalty, but basically that meant that others had to be loyal to *him*. He'd failed at every business he'd tried, but he turned out to be a genius at politics. Relying on his wealthy friends, keeping grudges, paying back favors, speaking sentences with all the right words but without any real meaning, he'd succeeded past anyone's expectations. Including her own. It infuriated her that Bog had turned out to have the last laugh.

She couldn't believe what a dope she'd been to fall for him in the first place. Her father had tried to tell her, in his sweet, bumbling way, but she hadn't listened.

A longing for Didi swept over her, almost blinding her for a moment with sudden tears. Her adopted father had always run a scheme, usually behind her back. He'd been a gambler with a loose connection to the truth who'd won his business—a café—in a game of sabaac. He was an unscrupulous liar, a delightful person, and a wonderful father.

Jude Watson

“Dex’s alley. Don’t make any sudden moves, they can get touchy around here,” Solace warned. “We’re under constant surveillance.”

Astri brought Lune closer. He was as necessary to her as breath, but she had to admit that he had basically made her a coward. When she remembered the girl who had shaved her head and gone off with a Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi, to track a bounty hunter, she could hardly believe she was the same person. Now she never put herself in danger. She would never risk her life again. Her life was Lune’s life.

The alley was narrow, the buildings around them seeming to crouch over it protectively. They had no windows, only slits, which gave them an ominous air. The alley twisted and turned, leading to dead ends. There was only one way in and one way out as far as Astri could see.

Solace stopped in front of a door that seemed indistinguishable from any of the dozens they’d passed. She stood in front of it for a moment. Then she heard a slight click, and the door slid open. They walked into a small, dark entryway. A short flight of stairs led to a closed door. Astri shivered. What if it was a trap?

Suddenly a door opened, and a column of yellow light shined down. Dexter Jettster’s massive bulk filled the doorway. He rested on a large lounge with a repulsorlift motor.

“Welcome, welcome,” he boomed. “Come upstairs where you’ll find friends.” He powered away to make room for them to ascend.

“Good to see you again, Solace, it is,” he said, nodding at her. “And Clive Flax—you may not remember, but we’ve met before.”

“I do remember,” Clive said. “I’m still digesting your sliders.”

Dex chortled a laugh. “They stick to your ribs, that’s for certain.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Dex then turned to Astri. He cocked his head to one side. Astri couldn't believe that such a massive creature could project such buoyant charm.

"And there you are, prettier than ever," he said. "I remember the day I bought the diner from your father. I heard of his passing. I'm sorrier than I can say. He was a good man. You must miss him dearly."

"I do," Astri said with a smile.

Dex chortled. "Left me a good business. I changed a few things, but everyone who came in still asked for you and Didi!"

"Thank you for taking us in," Astri said.

Dex bent over. "And this is your son."

"My name is Lune."

"And so it is, and I'm Dexter, but you can call me Dex, like everyone else does. You may not remember, but we've also met before. You were only two years old."

"I remember very well," Lune said.

"So he does, so he does!" Dex chortled. "Now. Let's get the tyke something to eat, and the rest of us will talk. There's much to say."

Within moments Lune was whisked off to the kitchen by WA-7, the antique droid who had worked for Dex in his diner. The others went to the conference room, where Keets and Curran were waiting.

Quickly, Solace outlined where the others were, and the fact that they'd had to smuggle Astri and Lune out of Samaria. Keets and Curran listened intently.

"You can stay here as long as you like," Curran said, bobbing his head toward Astri. "It's safe for now."

"We can be on the lookout for planets where you can lie low," Dex said. "Start over again with your boy. You'll have to choose carefully. Bog Divinian has plenty of connections, now that he's the ruler of Samaria. He's been appointed the acting ruler of Rosha, too. A governor of a system now, he is. Very important."

Jude Watson

Astri nodded.

“Now I have something to tell you,” Dex said, nodding to Clive and Solace. “Something Ferus needs to know. There’s a new head Inquisitor, name of Hydra. He’s taken over from Malorum—he was his assistant. It looks like he might have the same interests as Malorum. He’s investigating a human male with unusual powers who keeps popping up and disappearing.”

“Unusual powers?” Solace asked.

“He’s been seen in key areas in the Galactic Empire. Made some trouble for the Empire, I guess, and they want him bad. We don’t know why, exactly. Thing is, these ‘special powers’ sound a lot like using the Force to me. I thought you should know that.”

“Our contact is trying to find out more information,” Keets reported. “But everyone likes to keep their heads down, these days. Things are locked down tight. I’m sorry to say that Curran and I worked every connection we have and came up dry.”

“So let’s stick with what we know,” Dex said. “Word is that the order came down from high above—maybe even as high as Vader—to trap this fellow and bring him in for questioning. The last sighting was right here on Coruscant.”

“Do you think he’s a Jedi?” Solace asked.

“I think he could be,” Dex said. “Ferus ought to know.”

Solace frowned. “He’s in deep cover right now. We can’t get the information to him. I’m going to have to check it out myself.”

“I’ll give you a hand,” Clive said. “I owe Ferus a favor. More than one, actually, but don’t tell him I said that.”

Astri hesitated. She had vowed to herself to lay low here on Coruscant. She couldn’t risk exposure. She had to protect her son.

But Ferus had saved her life, and Lune’s. He would do it again and again if he had to.

It was time to find her courage.

“I’ll help,” Astri said. “You might need a good slicer.”

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Dex tilted his head at her. "You came here for a place to hide, not to get involved in this."

"Ferus needs help. He saved my boy's life. And I've always been ready to help the Jedi."

"I still have some contacts," Clive said. "If yours have run dry," he continued with a nod to Keets and Curran, "I might be able to dig something up."

Solace nodded. "I still can work some angles."

"What about us?" Keets asked. "There must be something Curran and I can do."

Dex's eyes twinkled. "Oh, I have the perfect job for the two of you," he said.

Chapter Nine

It felt good to Roan to get his boots back on his homeworld. No matter what, he was home.

Roan told himself this, but he knew he was just searching for something—just one thing—to make himself feel better. All around him he sensed Bellassa crumbling. His beloved city of Ussa—the city that had come through a war and an occupation and still found the will to resist down to the last citizen—had now fallen to its knees. He could feel it. “As goes Ussa, so goes Bellassa” was a saying on his homeworld. Everyone had looked to the capital city for trends, for signs, for direction, for courage.

And it was dying.

He felt displaced. It was almost a physical sensation, as if the gravity on the planet had changed. Or as if the thin air of the mountains had seeped down to the plains where Ussa was cradled, invading the city slowly until every citizen felt a little dizzy, a little short of breath.

Could he be losing his nerve?

He wished he could see Ferus again. His partnership with Ferus grounded him. Ferus was playing a dangerous game now, and for the first time Roan truly feared for the future.

He walked with Dona through the familiar streets of his old neighborhood. They had been to three diners already, searching

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for something to eat. Supplies were low. There was water flavored with the annisa herb from the mountains. But there was no tea. There was root paste but no fruit. Finally they found a kind Ussan who had set up a stand near the park with dried fruit and flatbread. She was almost sold out but gave them the last of what she had.

Dona looked somber as they ate their meager meal. "When people get hungry, resistance can fade," she said.

"With winter coming, how long can the Ussans hold out?" Roan wondered aloud. "If they agree to recognize the governor and obey the laws of the Empire, the Imperial army will lift the blockade."

"Soon mothers will see their children crying," Dona said. "Do we really want to sacrifice our children?"

The Empire had strangled the port, strictly regulating what came in and out. It had closed the theatres and museums and entertainment complexes that had given the city such vibrant life. It had filled the green parks with its black garrisons. It had taken away all the things that made life worth living. Except life itself.

Dona brushed the crumbs from the rough linen tunic she wore. "I'm not going back to the mountains," she told Roan.

He was surprised, but he didn't show it. For Dona, the mountains were sacred, the only place she felt at home. "Why?" he asked.

"I'm staying here to help the Eleven," Dona said. "Not by offering sanctuary now and again, or a guide if they need one. But real help."

"You do help," he said. "You're our contact in the mountain area, and that's become more important than ever."

Dona turned to him impatiently. "You have other agents in the mountains, good ones, and you know it. I'm an old woman, is that it? You think I can't be helpful?"

Roan laughed. "I don't think of you as an old woman, Dona. I know you'll be helpful. I just..."

"Want to protect me?"

Jude Watson

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Well, you’ve done enough. You and Ferus. I owe you both my life, and I owe my homeworld. Here’s the thing you might not realize: No one looks at an old woman. I can do more for you than you know.”

“All right,” Roan said. “We’re honored that you’ll stay.”

She inclined her head.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

“You and me, we’re too tough for them to catch,” Dona said with a smile.

Truth be told, he was glad. Dona was a link to Ferus. Before the Clone Wars, they had visited her in the mountains and stayed in her cabin. It was among their happiest times.

Roan had grown up in Ussa in a large extended family. He was used to noise and movement and laughter. His parents still lived in Ussa, but he rarely saw them, afraid he would endanger them. Two of his brothers had emigrated to other planets, and his sister had been killed in the Clone Wars, but his relatives—cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents—were still sprinkled around the city. He could walk down any street in Ussa and it would spark a memory, usually something that would make him smile.

“I saw Ferus on the HoloNet last night,” Dona said. “He is acting the part of the traitor very well. Too well.”

“Do you think he’s gone over to the Empire?” Roan asked. He didn’t think he could bear it if Dona thought that.

“No, of course not. But I’m worried that whatever good he thinks he will do will be canceled out by the bad. He was a symbol of hope to the people of Ussa. He escaped from two Imperial prisons. He got away. Now it appears that he’s bowed down to power. It looks like he’s given up, so why shouldn’t they?”

“Come on, let’s walk.” Roan stood. It wasn’t safe to linger too long anywhere now. “You may be right. And if I know Ferus,

he's thinking the same thing. There has to be a reason that he's remaining."

"You're probably right."

"I wish I could talk to him."

"The people of Ussa are ready to give in," Dona said. "Even in our short time here, I've heard the rumblings. If the Empire takes over the factories and builds more, there will be plenty of new jobs. People want to feed their families."

"That's what they're counting on."

"Yes, well, you can't eat integrity. Only bread."

They were silent as they walked, taking a roundabout route now, alert for Imperial spies. When Roan was certain they weren't being followed, he went to a nondescript house on a narrow street. As he and Dona walked up to the entry, the door opened. They slipped inside.

"Roan!" Amie Antin stepped forward and embraced him. "We didn't know what happened to you—when you contacted us, we were so happy." She turned to embrace Dona, who looked a bit startled at the gesture. She didn't know Amie that well.

Amie dabbed at her dark eyes. "Silly, I know. It's just that...we've had our losses lately. Terris and Naima."

Roan felt the sadness grip him. "What happened?"

"They were blasted by an Imperial ship. We think Darth Vader was aboard." She bit her lip. "And Ferus was, too."

There was an awkward pause. Roan knew how much it must have agonized Ferus to be aboard a ship that fired on those he'd fought beside and trusted. He hoped Ferus hadn't known that the ships had been piloted by friends.

"Amie? Bring them inside," a voice called.

Roan strode in. Wil sat on a low couch, his foot resting on a stool. It was strange to see strong, muscled Wil sitting down. He was usually full of energy.

"What happened?"

Jude Watson

“Just some blasterfire.” Wil waved a hand. “Amie says I’ll live.”

Roan looked at Amie for confirmation, and she nodded, telling him that Wil would be all right. Roan picked up a tenderness between them. He sensed something had changed. At last Wil had probably told Amie how he felt about her.

“I was down by the garrison,” Wil explained. “Under cover, of course. We like to monitor the comings and goings. Pick up a surprising amount of information that way. I was challenged by a sentry, and I decided to run for it.”

“I guess you didn’t run fast enough,” Roan said, taking a seat next to Wil. “Dona wants to join us. Officially, I mean.”

“We’re happy to hear it,” Wil said. “You’ll be a valuable addition to the Eleven, Dona.” He grimaced. “Such as we are.”

“She’ll need new ID docs,” Roan said. “I will, too. I can fabricate them. What shape is the equipment in? I know you had to move headquarters.”

“We’re set up here for ID fabrication,” Wil said. “But we’re talking about moving again. We’ve reached the point where we think it’s best to move every few weeks. We’ve scattered the group, and we all keep moving. The only trouble is...” Wil hesitated. “A few months ago, we had no problem getting Ussans to volunteer their help. Even if they weren’t part of the Eleven, they loaned us equipment. Apartments. Garages to store things. Safe houses. But that help has slowed to a trickle.”

“They’re growing tired of sacrifice,” Amie said. “And who can blame them? Our successes have boiled down to simply surviving. There seems no end in sight. The Empire just keeps consolidating. Growing stronger. More organized.”

“We can’t give up,” Roan said.

“Of course not,” Wil agreed. “We need to have a success. Something big. Something that will give them hope. But we’re running out of options. Our funds are very low. We need credits for bribes, for equipment.”

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"We might be able to help you there," Roan said, with a glance at Dona. "Do you remember Trever Flume?"

"Of course," Amie said. "We just saw him a few weeks ago."

"Trever has been the main contact to a resistance worker named Flame. We don't know her real name. She's from Acherin. She has an enormous fortune at her disposal. Her idea is to fund as many resistance groups as she can, then link them into one central operation. She's going planet to planet to contact the resistance on each one. She's calling the operation by the code name Moonstrike."

"It's an idea," Wil said, considering it. "It could expose us too much. But then again there's strength in numbers. We've often wished we could coordinate with other planets. Share information."

"It's worth a meeting," Amie said. "Would Flame come here?"

"She's already on Bellassa, waiting for our signal," Roan said. "She would be willing to fund an operation for the Eleven."

"Let's have a meeting, then," Wil said, with a glance at Amie.

"What about Ferus?" Roan asked.

Amie looked down at her lap. Wil studied his wounded foot.

"Be honest," Roan said.

"We support whatever he's doing," Wil said. "It's not that."

"But does he have to be so visible?" Amie burst out. "He's all over the HoloNet."

"They planned it that way, I'm sure," Roan said. "Ferus is stuck. He has to keep his position."

"But why?" Amie asked. "Has he brought back any information we can use?"

Roan shook his head. He couldn't explain to Amie and Wil that Ferus had a larger goal now. Ferus was looking for Jedi. He was lending his support and expertise to the resistance when he could, but it wasn't his first priority. As a double agent, he was in a perfect position to eventually access any records the Empire

Jude Watson

would have on suspected Jedi activity. Roan knew well that Ferus couldn't give that up. Not yet.

"At this point, we're wondering if the danger he's putting himself in is worth it," Wil said. "I don't believe that he's on the side of the Empire, but many Bellassans do. The evidence is in front of their faces."

"It had better be worth it," Amie said.

"I'm sure it will be," Roan said. "I'm sure Ferus is painfully aware of the image he's projecting." Roan thought a moment. "In any case, we should make contact with him while he's here. This factory business—what's really going on? It's never really what they say it is."

"And it's rarely to our benefit," Wil added.

"I'll contact him," Roan said.

"But how? He's surrounded by the Empire. He's practically attached to Darth Vader's hip," Amie said with a grimace.

"I have a way," Roan promised.

Chapter Ten

Attachment. Ferus wasn't supposed to have any. If he wanted to be a true Jedi, that is.

But what did that mean, attachment? Even as a Padawan it had puzzled him. He had been attached to Siri, his Master. She'd been a mentor, a big sister, a presence in his life that had protected him and, in her own way, cherished him.

What does that mean, to not be attached?

He'd asked her the question on a long run to the Outer Rim. Siri had been in one of her favorite positions, on the cockpit floor. She used to like to stretch out there with the hum of the engines under her back, her booted feet crossed on the copilot seat.

It seems so hard, Master. To have so many beings who are important to me but not to be attached to them. I don't understand what is meant by "no attachment."

Siri didn't sit up, but he saw her boot swing back and forth, back and forth, as she considered the question. Thinking back now, Ferus wondered at the expression on her face. There had been a play of emotion that made her look soft, then sad, and then that emotion just...went away, and what was left was simply contemplation, a Master trying to arrive at the right answer for a question that had no answer.

Jude Watson

It's not so hard to explain, Siri had answered finally. To love without wanting to possess or influence. To cherish without keeping. To have without holding.

Ferus remembered nodding. He had thought he'd gotten it. As usual, he had wanted to please her.

I understand, Master.

Siri had looked at him then and smiled. *No, you don't. It's not something to understand. It's something to strive for.*

But here he was on Bellassa, and everything here reminded him of attachment. Attachment to a homeworld, attachment to Roan, attachment to friends. He kept bumping into memories wherever he looked.

He saw that the Jedi were right. It was interfering with his Force connection. It was interfering with his concentration. All he wanted to do was slip away and find Roan, relax into the camaraderie of the Eleven.

After what had happened with the Empire, Obi-Wan had told him that because so much had changed, perhaps the rules of the Jedi would change—if there were any Jedi alive to change them. Perhaps attachment would be valued. They were up against a system that valued nothing, least of all attachment. So maybe they needed to hold what they could.

He didn't want to let them go. He didn't want to let any of it go. Any of the attachment in his heart.

He would have to find a way to make it all fit. His connection to the Force, and his connection to the Living Force. Not the abstract, but the particular. A particular face that brought him joy. A familiar walk he searched for among the throngs in Ussa. He could find strength in that, not weakness.

He hadn't known how to be close to someone when he left the Temple. He had learned. Roan had shown him how. Roan had grown up in an extended family that was full of arguments and laughter and family lunches that went on through dinner and into the midnight hour. They had accepted Ferus without question, and they had become his family, too.

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And now he was betraying them. They were seeing him on the HoloNet. They were wondering how he could have betrayed them in such a way.

He hadn't been alone since he'd arrived. Vader had made sure of that. He'd been dragged to meeting after meeting, shown off like a trained animal. Constantly managed, constantly escorted, so that he was unable to talk to a Bellassan directly.

He could get away. He just wasn't sure if he should. Let them do their work, let them present him as a traitor to the Bellassans. Until he knew for sure what he was doing and where he was going, he would continue to feel the agony of this and do nothing except wait—and hope he would discover more about Twilight and more about what the Empire was actually doing on Bellassa. Because he knew something for sure: Something was up. Which wasn't very much to know, but he had hopes.

The meeting was with engineers and scientists from many planets around the galaxy, all volunteering their time to retool Ussan factories and get their economy going again.

Or at least that was the spin.

Ferus waited in an adjoining room. He was never in the meetings where the real words were said. They trotted him out for the benefit of journalists and native Bellassans. He was present for the meeting in which platitudes were exchanged and promises made that had nothing to do with the real issues.

He was in a factory. The factories in Ussa were models of cleanliness and order. They were confined to one district, and mixed both advanced technology and good design. Ussans were proud of their textiles and ceramics, which were coveted around the galaxy. The factories weren't large, but there were many of them, and they usually employed a sizable population in Ussa.

They'd been closed for six months.

Ferus looked out the window at a garden that was set up with tables and chairs for the workers to eat outdoors in good weather. Bellassa was blessed with flowering bushes that

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bloomed throughout the year. To his surprise the garden showed evidence of care. The path borders were sharp, the bushes trimmed and thriving. But the factory had been closed.

"I keep it up."

Ferus turned at the sound of the voice. A man of middle years, with silver hair, looked out the window at the garden. "It was never my job. I was in charge of security. Then I became the caretaker when it closed. But I couldn't stand to see the weeds choking it. It was always a pretty spot. So I made sure it stayed that way, hoping the factory would reopen soon."

"It looks like it will," Ferus said.

"Say, aren't you supposed to be in that meeting there?"

Ferus realized that the man hadn't recognized him. Since Ferus wore the clothes of an outlander, the man assumed that he was one of the scientists.

"Yes, but they locked the door," Ferus said.

The man held up a key card. "I can open it, so you can sneak in the back." He winked. "No sense riling up the Empire. Not these days."

"I appreciate it," Ferus said. Maybe he could learn something, finally, if he entered before he was supposed to.

He followed the man down the hallway and they stopped in front of the unmarked door. The man swiped his key card and the door slid open noiselessly. Ferus slipped inside. He was behind a group of Imperial security officers, all of them high-ranking. They did not turn. Darth Vader was present, requiring their attention. The gray-faced Moff Tarkin was speaking.

"...will have the technical resources of the Empire to assist you," he was saying. "If you need assistants or additional computers or resource materials, you can requisition them. On Bellassa the focus will be on new technologies for power conduits and modular components for artificial atmospheres on an unprecedented scale. You will divide into focus groups and attack problems with new solutions. We expect innovation and

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we demand results. You have the honor of working on a project that will benefit the security and stability of the entire galaxy.”

One of the scientists spoke up, a serious-looking woman in a dark burgundy tunic. “But what is the project?”

“That is on a need-to-know basis,” Tarkin said.

“How can we work on this if we don’t know the big picture?” someone else asked.

Ferus felt the power of Vader’s anger ripple across the room.

“You’ve received your instructions,” Tarkin said. “I hope that all of you are happy with the arrangements the Empire made for your families.”

It was as though all the air had been sucked out of the room. The looks of impatience and condescension on the scientist’s faces changed to fear. Ferus could smell it.

He realized what it meant. The Empire had taken their families. They were holding them hostage to ensure the scientists’ cooperation.

The woman in the burgundy tunic spoke up. Her voice was pitched low and did not tremble. “Will we be allowed to contact them?”

“Visits will be arranged. As long as you are able to focus on your work. You’ll submit regular reports of your progress to me.”

When no one objected, Tarkin continued. “All of this is being done to facilitate new strides in research and discovery. You are privileged to be in a position to assist the Empire.” He nodded toward the back of the room. “Bring in the press.”

This was Ferus’s cue. He stepped behind a pillar and waited until the press obediently streamed in, then trailed behind them. He knew what was expected of him. He was present in order to convince them that knuckling under to the Empire was inevitable, even for so-called resistance heroes. He went and sat next to Darth Vader. He watched as Tarkin continued as the official spokesperson, touting the group as a think tank called the Bellassan Project, which would hurtle Bellassa into the future with advanced technological discoveries, all of which would

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benefit the planet. The scientists had agreed to take up residence on Bellassa for an unspecified period, out of their great desire to join this ambitious and unparalleled voyage into research and discovery.

Blah-blah, Ferus thought. It was an expression of Trever's.

"As you can see, the great Bellassan hero Ferus Olin is here to facilitate the transition," Tarkin continued.

Ferus fought against the revulsion that rose in him. He saw the floating HoloNet news camera trained on his face. He made himself think of nothing so that his face would look blank. He did not want to give the impression that he was pleased, nor did he want to give Vader grounds to complain about him.

He had to play the game. Now, in addition to Twilight, he had to find out the Empire's real plans for Bellassa. Were the two things linked? What was the top-secret project the scientists had been recruited for?

Ferus climbed into the Imperial airspeeder with the rest of the security crew. They sped through the streets of Ussa back to the Bluestone Lake District at the center of the city. The garrison, a blight on the landscape, rose from the former Commons. Once the Commons had been green parkland that rolled for kilometers, a central place for Ussans to gather.

"Hangar's full," the pilot said. "You'll have to walk from here."

Ferus got out with the others. He'd walked across this green thousands of times in what felt like a former life. He started down the slate walkway to the garrison. The others fell into step around him in what he knew was a flanking maneuver to keep him from turning off.

Ahead he saw a splotch of paint on the sidewalk, as though someone had been walking with a dripping can. Ferus counted to twenty-five and saw another red splotch. Then another twenty-five. A yellow one.

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Impatiently, the officers hurried ahead. He was left with the stormtroopers. No doubt they had their orders to surround him. He felt the shoulder of the guard next to him brush his own. His footsteps matched theirs. They were subtly guiding him toward the garrison entrance just a few meters away.

But the marks told him he had to ditch them somehow. It was a code so ingrained in him it was like a voice in his ear.

Roan needed to see him.

Chapter Eleven

Bog Divinian bounced on the chair in his new office on Rosha. It was a silly indulgence he allowed himself when no one was around. He couldn't believe he was actually here, a ruler of a whole system. Of course Samaria was only a two-planet system, but it was in the Core, and it was a start.

He looked out the window and down on the ruins of the city. The smoke was still thick over the buildings. He had already drawn up plans to rebuild the city. Or, rather, he had ordered someone to find someone to do it. It was worth nothing to the Emperor in the state it was in now. Rosha had the technical expertise that was sorely needed by the Empire, so he would have to get it back up to speed. He couldn't risk losing this position. He knew the invasion hadn't gone well. It had been a bit heavy-handed.

But all in all, he was doing well. Very well.

A passing cloud rendered the window opaque, and he saw himself reflected. For a moment, he looked old. There had been too many long nights lately. He had shadows under his eyes, and was that a sagging at his jawline? Politics could age you. But politicians couldn't afford to look old. He'd have to find time to sneak away and tighten up a few things. Soon.

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Bog swiveled back and forth in the chair, his buoyant mood flattened. Just when he started to think he had his hands full of riches, he would suddenly remember something he didn't have, and he would crash back down into unhappiness again.

It was a lonely feeling.

It was all Astri's fault. He'd had a family, and she'd stolen it.

He'd won the political game, but somehow Astri had outsmarted him and spirited Lune away. He had spies working for him, trying to track her down, but she'd simply vanished from the Fountain Towers in Sath, flying off with a mysterious group, no doubt helped by the resistance.

He reached for his comlink and contacted Sano Sauro. Sauro had messed up badly and had been demoted, but Bog had learned never to kick down the ladder that had boosted him to the top. You never knew when you'd need the ladder again.

Sauro took his communication immediately, which was pleasant. Now that Bog was Imperial governor, he wouldn't have to scrounge for attention.

Sauro was still a Senator because he could be counted on to vote strictly as the Emperor wanted him to, but he was no longer head of powerful committees, no longer a known politician with Palpatine's ear. Now he was merely in charge of the Imperial Naval Academy, which amused Bog to no end. Sauro was practically a nursemaid!

"Hello, Bog," Sauro said. "How is the governorship coming?"

Bog could hear the poison in his tone. Sauro was probably being eaten alive by jealousy. He'd thought he was smarter than Bog and would rise faster under the new government. What he hadn't valued was Bog's gut instincts. That made him smarter than all the rest of those know-it-alls.

"Coming along," Bog answered shortly. "Lots to do, busy time here. Trying to unite the planet, get them on board with the Empire."

"Of course."

"Any word on our project?"

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“None. But I’ve tapped into the SAM database.”

“What’s that?”

“Suspicious Movement. Acronym SM. Nickname SAM. Stormtroopers and spies patrol Coruscant and keep their eyes open for suspicious activity. Do spot ID checks. It also goes on within worlds occupied by the Empire. Governors set up the programs. They all go into one database and are cross-referenced and cross-checked. Then the head security officer decides on surveillance. I have clearance for the database now. I thought you’d know about SAM, Bog.”

Sauro was leaning on his name, just a little bit. Just to show that they were still close associates. Bog wondered if he could ask Sauro to call him Governor.

“Oh, of course,” he said quickly. “I just didn’t get the lingo.”

“Right. Anyway, I’ve got reports coming in daily, and I go through them personally. Any leads, I’ll let you know.”

“How’d you do that? Get access to the database? Let’s face it, your clearance must have been bumped down to almost zero, Sano-Mano.” Bog allowed himself a small laugh.

“This is a naval academy,” Sauro said in a voice like a carbon-freezer. “I’m still heading the search for any Force-adepts to join it. I have a valuable friendship with Hydra.”

The new Grand Inquisitor. How had Sauro managed it? He wasn’t a guy you’d want to spend time with. Yet he managed to collect more favors and alliances than even Bog. Which was one reason to keep him happy.

“All right, then. Keep me in the know. And I’ll pass on what a good job you’re doing, next time I speak to Emperor Palpatine.” Bog didn’t usually speak to him, actually. But he was sure he would be, now that he was governor of an important system.

“Your generosity has always been overwhelming,” Sauro said.

Bog felt flattered, even if he wasn’t sure Sauro was being sincere. “Well, you know, the galaxy is big. Lots going on. We’ve got to keep each other in the loop. Help where we can.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

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Bog sensed that Sauro was about to sign off, so he quickly turned off his comlink so he could be the one to break the communication. Then he stabbed at the button for his assistant and asked him to find out why that SAM program hadn't been set up on Rosha. Unless it already had been, and the notation was buried in those reports he kept meaning to read.

Until then, he had Sauro on the line.

Chapter Twelve

“I haven’t been lucky since the Emperor took over,” Solace said in a low tone to her companions. “I forgot what it feels like.”

“It feels gleaming good,” Clive said. “That’s all I know. It’s about time we caught a break.”

He and Astri huddled with Solace in an alley. Clive had investigated some old contacts on Coruscant. One of the contacts had clued him in on a network of residence inns that would accept those on the run from the Empire. The group had left surveillance devices outside of each inn. Three levels below the Orange District, they hit paydirt.

It was nothing more than a shadow on the surveillance playback. A figure who leaped from a building a hundred meters away, landed lightly on the roof, then entered the building through an open window. Solace had seen the image and breathed *Jedi*. Immediately they had staked it out. No one had come in or out, through the front door or the windows or the roof.

“It’s time to take a look,” Solace said. “I doubt I can surprise a Jedi, but if I can get close enough they’ll see that I’m a Jedi, too. I’d like to avoid tangling with one unnecessarily.”

“Good point,” Clive said. “You go first.”

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Solace arched an eyebrow at him, then Force-leaped to a ledge fifty meters up.

“Show-off,” Clive said.

From high above, Solace looked down on Astri and Clive. She hoped they would stay out of the way.

From that vantage point, she spied the window she’d seen on the surveillance feed. Solace leaped over the distance and into the open window.

She stood in a narrow hallway, listening to the quality of the silence. It was a trick she’d honed on countless, tedious sessions at the Temple. She’d only been a human. She didn’t have the kind of extrasensory powers she’d seen in other species. So she’d worked on her senses for endless hours. She’d discovered that her hearing was above average, so she’d focused on that. She’d drilled and drilled, entering thousands of different sounds into the computer, turning down the volume lower and lower to identify them, until she could hear a fly land on a wall twenty meters away.

Concentrate. Differentiate. The slight hum of the air control vents, the distant whine of the lift tube. A cough behind the door of 1257. Someone turned over on a sleep couch in the room directly opposite her. In the room next to that, a towel slipped off a rod and fell to the floor. It was picked up and re-hung.

Then she heard what she was waiting for.

The slither of rough fabric against the leather of a belt as someone moved. The slight, unmistakable metallic click as an object was unclipped.

He knew she was here.

Solace went carefully down the hallway, stopping outside the door she wanted. There was only one way to announce herself, one way to let the being on the other side of the door know she meant him no harm.

She unclipped her lightsaber, activated it, and buried it in the door.

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A heartbeat later, three things happened simultaneously. A lightsaber came through the door from the other side.

Well, hello, she said in her head.

She was still smiling as stormtroopers charged out of the lift tube. At the same moment, Clive and Astri climbed in the hallway window.

“Stormtroopers!” Astri shouted.

“No kidding!” Solace yelled back.

The blasterfire streaked down the hallway. Solace pulled her lightsaber out of the molten metal doorway and began advancing, her lightsaber dancing. She didn’t know what the Jedi on the other side of the door would do, but a little help would be nice.

But no one arrived.

The stormtroopers released two droidekas in wheel mode. No Jedi wanted to tangle with a droideka. They were hard to shut down, and their double-barreled blaster cannonfire could give even a Jedi a battle headache. Solace leaped out of the way, trying to figure out a way to get past the deflector shields without being blown to bits.

Another stormtrooper rolled a grenade down toward her. Solace kicked it back with one foot while leaping up to take down the seeker droid overhead. More stormtroopers poured out of the lift tube. The grenade exploded, sending three of them flying.

She certainly had her hands full.

Thanks a lot, whoever you are, Solace thought. The Jedi had obviously escaped out of the room through the window.

Well, the galaxy had changed, and the remaining Jedi had changed along with it. It was every Jedi for himself or herself now.

Wasn’t that what she’d told Ferus?

A spasm of blasterfire came a little close for comfort. Her battle mind had slipped for a moment. It wasn’t like her to start *thinking* in the middle of a battle. That could be deadly.

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Suddenly a tall human male came swinging out of the turbolift shaft. Solace didn't get a glimpse of his face, hidden in the shadows of a hood. But his lightsaber work was extraordinary. The stormtroopers were surrounded now, and Solace and the mysterious Jedi moved as a team. The tall Jedi was obviously familiar with droidekas. He charged, his lightsaber in a spinning arc, and with deft precision struck them at a vulnerable point Solace hadn't known existed, underneath their shell, near their repulsorlift motors.

The Jedi leaped over the remaining stormtroopers and landed by her side. She had a quick impression of chromium eyes, pale skin, and a melancholy face.

He jerked his chin toward the window in the hallway, where Clive and Astri had taken shelter in a doorway.

She read his intent without words. It was time to get out of there.

They raced down the hallway together, still deflecting fire from the remaining stormtroopers. Solace signaled to Clive and Astri, who leaped out the window, using their liquid cables. Solace and the Jedi followed. They landed on the roof next door and raced across it, dodging vents and debris.

The Jedi took the lead. It was obvious that he had planned an escape route. He led them to an empty lift tube shaft that had a small door on the roof. Using their liquid cables, Astri and Clive rappelled down the shaft. Solace and the Jedi jumped.

The tall Jedi led them into a service level of the building, where laundry and storage were held. They ran down a twisting maze of hallways that were like tunnels. He pried off a grid in the wall and hurried them inside. Crawling, they followed the pipe until he pointed above. Solace pushed the grid out. They climbed out into an unfamiliar alley.

Stained with rust and mud, the four regarded one another. The Jedi said nothing. Solace didn't recognize him. She saw now that his hair was white and cut close to his skull. Despite his large frame, he held himself gracefully.

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“Aren’t you going to introduce yourself?” Solace asked.

“Ry-Gaul,” he said. His voice was low and softer than she’d expected.

“My name as a Jedi was Fy-Tor Ana,” Solace said. “Now I am Solace.”

“Are there others?” Ry-Gaul asked. “I have been alone.”

“Not many,” Solace said. “I was contacted by Ferus Olin. He’s trying to gather any Jedi who are left. He was—”

“—Siri Tachi’s apprentice.” Ry-Gaul’s face underwent a change. The severe lines smoothed out. It was close to a smile, but not quite. “Ferus,” he said. “I was on several missions with him. With my Padawan, Tru Veld.”

Solace nodded. She had never kept track of the Padawans. She had chosen not to take an apprentice. But Ferus had mentioned Tru Veld. He’d been a friend. Ferus had found his lightsaber at the Temple.

“Do you know something about him?” Ry-Gaul asked, his tone suddenly urgent.

“I know he is dead,” she said. “I’m sorry.” It wasn’t like her to tell someone she was sorry about something she had nothing to do with. But something about this large man of few words made her be a little more polite than she usually was.

Ry-Gaul bowed his head. “It is what I expected. Yet it is hard to hear it.”

Solace bent her head close to him. “Out of all the beings in the universe, I think I am one of the few who can say I know how you feel.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ferus didn't know if it would work. But he eliminated doubt from his mind. If he wondered if it would work, it wouldn't.

He turned to the stormtroopers. "You can leave me here. I can find my way alone."

The stormtrooper turned to the others. "We can leave him here. He can find his way alone."

Was it really that simple?

Simple, it is. Belief, it is.

To reach the point where it was simple—*that* was hard.

Ferus didn't push his luck. He walked quickly away, down the path, then doubled back to cross the garrison from the rear, where its perimeter was closest to the street. He quickly crossed to a busy boulevard. He expected to be stopped at any moment. Instead he was able to lose himself in the crowd.

He wasn't followed; he was sure of that. He walked down the familiar streets. Despite the fact that he was worried and frazzled and worn out, he felt something in him lift. Just to be walking these streets, without an escort. Just to be himself, no matter how short a time.

Before they had both left for the Clone Wars, he and Roan had talked about what they would do if they were separated, if Bellassa were overrun, if...*There were so many ifs in those days*, Ferus

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thought. But not nearly as many as now. So they had staked out several areas in and around Ussa for a meeting, then assigned each place a code. They also chose several places in the city and several methods to alert each other. Ferus hadn't forgotten any of it.

Roan had indicated to him to proceed to their third secret meeting place, in the Cloud Lake District, near their old office. It was a large, bustling café. Ferus entered, carefully keeping his hood over his face so that he wouldn't be recognized. He knew this café well. Roan had no doubt chosen it because it was always crowded, and it had three entrances and exits.

Roan was waiting.

Ferus kept moving, but his eyes blurred and it was hard to see. The café was full, and it was a swirl of color and motion, of sound that hit his ears in a continuous roar. He felt overwhelmed by the sensation. It was home, and there was Roan, waiting. For one impossible moment it was as though nothing had changed.

It was not the way a Jedi was supposed to see or hear. It was not the way a Jedi was supposed to feel.

A Jedi shouldn't want to go back.

A Jedi should accept where he was.

He was conscious of Dona at a nearby table. That helped to steady him. He was able to survey the room, look for exits and strategies should they be discovered. Only then did he look back and feel pleasure at seeing Roan again.

He sat at the table. "It was so strange to see you sitting here."

Roan knew exactly what he meant. "Like nothing had changed."

"When everything has."

Roan's sad eyes were the same clear green-gray. He was growing healthier by the day. The torture procedures he'd undergone at the Imperial prison had not changed him as Ferus had feared they would.

"Trevor?" Ferus asked.

"Is fine. He's here, on Bellassa."

Ferus nodded. The relief he felt made his legs feel weak.

"He came to the base in a new ship, thinking we'd all welcome him with open arms. Well, we welcomed him."

Ferus smiled. "At least he came back."

"That's what *he* said."

Roan allowed a moment to pass, a moment of shared silence. His hands rested on the table, one hand cupped inside the other in a way that only Roan had.

"Why did you call for me?" Ferus asked. He didn't know how much time they had, but it wasn't much.

"The Eleven are concerned with your role on Bellassa," Roan said. "Sentiment in Ussa is running against you. I realize that for you that's a secondary consideration. But it is a blow to the resistance movement. And we've had many of those lately. Are you learning anything we can use?"

"Not yet," Ferus admitted. "I'm kept on a very short leash. But I did get a quick peek at Vader's code cylinder files. There's something on it called Twilight that I want to look into. A large-scale operation. And then there's the question of the factory retooling here in Ussa. What's really going on with that?"

"Are the two related?"

"Could be, but I don't think so. Twilight has all the earmarks of a snare operation, like Order 66. The plans here involve something big, some kind of technology that the Empire is developing that's so secret only a few at the top know about it."

"Who? Vader?"

"Vader, for one. Moff Tarkin, too."

"Tarkin. He's a nasty piece of work. Seems to have his fingers in plenty of pies." Roan thought for a moment. "Can you get us in to where they keep records?"

"I don't know. I'll have to do some investigating first."

"They'd have to keep some sort of files at the factory itself. At the beginning of an operation, things can be messy—systems aren't in place, the chain of command isn't quite set. We'd have to get in, probably at night, and snoop around."

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Ferus nodded. "If we find out what it is, I'm ready to quit. I'm done."

"Tired of Vader's company already?"

He grimaced. "If we can expose what they're doing here, suspicion will fall on me. They won't trust me with anything after that. And if I can walk away and go underground here in Bellassa..."

"It will embarrass them." Roan nodded. "I think you've put in enough time."

"It's just that...Twilight. Whatever that is. I need to find out."

"There are other ways. You don't have to be in Vader's pocket. They might never give you the clearance to find anything significant anyway."

"That's what I thought. But...if I stop working for the Empire, I can't stay on Bellassa. I'll need to go back to the base for a time. Then head out and look for more Jedi."

"I know," Roan said. "I'm glad you brought that up. I've finally seen your secret base, and can I tell you this? You need help."

Ferus let the implications sink in. He knew what it meant. Roan was offering to come with him.

"You always said your job was here, on Bellassa."

"My job is to help you," Roan said. "If that means helping with your crackpot plan to find the Jedi, I'll do it. We're part of the same struggle now. I'm replaceable here on Bellassa. There are those who can take my place. You need help there. I agree with this Flame person when it comes to one thing: We have to look at galactic resistance. It's the only way. We can't do it only on one planet. Sooner or later, what you're doing will link up with what's being done elsewhere."

"I hope so," Ferus said. "I'm just glad you're coming."

"I'm coming. But first let's do what we can here. Contact me when you come up with a way to get in. I'll assemble a team."

They stood. They couldn't risk staying any longer. Ferus again felt the loneliness wrap around his heart. There were so many

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things he wanted to talk to Roan about, and couldn't. Not just about logistics, but feelings. One thing about war—there was never enough time.

A quick grasp of each other's upper arms in their old greeting, a look into each other's eyes, and Ferus turned on his heel and was gone.

Chapter Fourteen

Keets collapsed on a bench, breathing hard. “I didn’t...sign on...to the resistance...to be”—He leaned his head back and let out an explosive puff of air—“a nanny!”

“He’s a handful,” Curran said, with a fond look at Lune.

They sat in a small park on the uppermost level of Coruscant, near the Senate District. Lune had begged to be allowed to play, and the Orange District was hardly suitable. Astri had given reluctant permission. She’d wanted Lune to get some sun, despite her worries. He’d been on an asteroid for weeks without light.

Keets and Curran had decided on a neighborhood popular with families so they could lose themselves in the crowds. “Can’t we get a droid for this job?” Keets wondered. “Some Class Three Nanny with a nice disposition?”

“Dex asked us to do it,” Curran said. “Besides, a droid won’t keep an eye out for stormtroopers.”

“That kid could probably program it, too,” Keets said. “That kid could probably do anything he set his mind to.”

They watched as Lune joined in a game some boys and girls had improvised on one of the playground installations, a large plastoid power slide that sent off puffs of air to speed descent.

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The group had lined up on the various chutes and were racing to see who could get down fastest. The laughter traveled over to Keets and Curran.

"C'mon," Curran said. "This has got to make even you smile."

"I don't go gooey over kids," Keets said. "I may no longer be a galactically famous journalist, I may have to scrounge and shrink from every glowlamp, and I may be living with a former pusher of bantha stew, but I haven't sunk that low."

"You're a very cynical human," Curran said serenely.

Keets put an arm over the bench and looked over at a towering statue of Emperor Palpatine. "Galactic City used to be a fairly nice place."

"You mean *Imperial* City," Curran corrected.

"I'll never call it that," Keets replied. "Emperor Palpa-creep can rename it, but I don't have to listen to him. Hey, what's that kid up to now?" Keets asked, looking over at Lune.

The boy had opened the control panel of the power slide and was making an adjustment.

"Should we..." Keets said.

Curran shook his head, grinning. "I say we just watch."

Lune scrambled back up the ramp to the very top of the slide. He positioned himself in front of the jets. The sensor picked up his presence, and a blast of air sent him straight up into the air. Instead of landing, Lune hung there.

Keets's jaw dropped. Curran half rose.

Lune did a somersault in the air. He looked down at the other kids with their upturned faces and stuck out his tongue.

"Curran..." Keets said warningly.

"He's okay," Curran said. He had relaxed back into his seat.

"That's not what I mean." Keets nudged him and pointed.

A squad of stormtroopers on patrol was crossing the street.

"What should we do?" Curran asked. His furry face, normally the color of a roasted nut, paled.

"If we run toward him, we'll just attract their attention," Keets said. "They won't notice. Nobody notices kids."

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Lune landed on the bottom of the slide, then leaped up again. The other kids screamed at him with glee, clapping their hands.

The head stormtrooper looked up.

“Uh-oh,” Keets breathed.

Lune jumped down on the slide, caught another blast of air, and used it and the Force to leap even higher. He landed on top of a neighboring terrace, then used the momentum to leap back again and land in front of the cheering children.

Keets could see only the helmets of the stormtroopers move as they tracked Lune.

“Let’s get him,” Keets said.

They walked over to Lune. Keets spoke softly. “Time to go, kiddo.”

“No!” the other kids all shouted. “Show us how you did that!”

“Sorry!” Curran tried to extricate himself from the crowd of kids.

The squad of stormtroopers started to head over.

Keets dug into his pocket and extricated the bag of sweets he’d bought from a vendor. He threw them into the air. “Have fun!”

The kids scattered, chasing the candy. Keets urged Lune forward. Curran flanked him, and they quickly hustled him out of the playground. They turned down the first street they came to, then the next, and the next, until they were lost in the crowd and they knew they hadn’t been followed.

They looked at each other over Lune’s head.

It hardly mattered that they’d escaped.

Lune had been noticed.

Chapter Fifteen

Ferus slipped back into the garrison and went to the quarters that had been assigned to him. He sat on the chair, thinking.

Conduits and modular components for artificial atmospheres on an unprecedented scale.

Ferus knew that *artificial atmospheres* could mean anything. It could be a small city or a large ship or a building. Was the Empire building a massive prison? New headquarters?

Not headquarters, Ferus thought. The Emperor had retooled the Senate to his liking. He had no need of new headquarters. And besides, such a project wouldn't have to be secret.

...an unprecedented scale...

Ferus didn't like the sound of that.

For the next three days, Ferus was escorted to the factory along with the scientists. Bellassan factories had always combined their research laboratories with their manufacturing facilities in the same compound, so the scientists already had some resources to begin. Ferus found himself with the menial tasks of checking off the delivery of various supplies to the labs, like dataports and durasheets. Since nothing classified had begun, reporters from the HoloNet were given free rein.

Ferus was along as a "facilitator," meaning that he attended meetings where nothing much was decided in order to be in

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more news reports about the amazing Empire and what it could accomplish on Bellassa. Nowhere was it mentioned what the scientists would be working on, except in the vaguest terms.

At least in his position he was able to watch. He noted that Moff Tarkin often went into one particular office, where senior officers sat in front of computer consoles. He guessed they were setting up programs and organizational structures. A nervous-looking team of Bellassan architects were brought in, no doubt to “facilitate” the conversion.

Ferus tried to find a way to be alone with the scientists, but they were closely guarded. He could sense the misery of some of them, but he could tell that several others had volunteered for this mission. One scientist from Eriadu seemed especially eager to impress Tarkin. The sad-faced woman in the burgundy tunic kept to herself, but her misery was like a cloud around her.

Ferus’s only hope was to get into that room.

On the third afternoon, he was beginning to despair when, on his way to leave with a troop of officers, he saw the factory caretaker passing on a repulsorlift cart. Ferus made a small sign of acknowledgment, but the caretaker turned his head.

Puzzled at his reaction, Ferus walked out with the officers to the main docking bay. It was empty.

“The ship was supposed to be here waiting,” the senior officer said, annoyed. He took out his comlink. “What’s the status on the transport back to the garrison?” he barked.

“There was a shutdown on all air traffic while they made the trial run of supply ships for the Despayre run,” a voice said.

“Get a ship here now!” the officer ordered testily.

Despayre. Ferus had heard that name before, when he’d been at the Imperial prison planet in the Outer Rim. The prisoners had worked in a huge factory. They never knew what they were working on, but he’d discovered that the parts were being shipped to a facility on Despayre.

It was too much of a coincidence. Was it a piece of the puzzle?

Ferus's gaze wandered over to the translucent doors at one end of the platform. They opened into the deserted garden.

"I'll wait in there," he told the officer, who grimaced but nodded.

Ferus waved his hand over the sensor and walked into the garden. In a moment, another door opened, and, just as he'd hoped, the caretaker entered. He didn't glance at Ferus but immediately put down his tools and knelt down to weed around a grouping of tender plants.

"I'm glad they let you keep the garden," Ferus said, coming up behind him.

The caretaker didn't look up. "They? Seems to me you're one of them now."

Ferus couldn't miss the contempt in the man's tone.

"I didn't recognize you at first," the caretaker continued, his hands in the soil as he carefully pulled out a weed. "Now I know who you are. You fought them and defied them and made them look like fools. And now you're one of them."

Ferus took a breath, considering. He was getting nowhere here. He had to find a way. He had to trust someone.

The caretaker stood, dusting off his trousers. "We were a unique world. We resisted to every last man, woman, and child. They couldn't find their spies here, their betrayers. We protected you and all of the Eleven, even as they grew to number hundreds. Every family had someone working for the resistance. Maybe..."—The caretaker looked steadily at his flowers, never at Ferus, and shook his head—"...maybe you were only the first to fall. But that doesn't mean I have to be civil to you."

"I don't expect politeness," Ferus said. "Just honesty. And maybe...help."

"I have no help to give you."

Ferus bent down and carefully placed his hand near a small lizard that was sitting on a leaf. It crawled onto his palm. Bright green, it blinked at the two of them. Ferus brought the lizard over to a bright orange blossom and placed it there. The lizard's

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skin began to blush. Its pigment changed until it blazed in the same bright color as the blossom. The transformation was so complete that it was impossible to pick out the lizard now. He'd disappeared against the flower.

Ferus looked steadily at the caretaker. "It looks like a blossom," he said. "But the lizard is still a lizard."

He saw that the caretaker knew what he was trying to tell him without words. The lizard could change his skin, could blend in, in order to survive. So could Ferus. But that didn't make him part of the Empire.

"Don't you wish," Ferus said, "you knew what they were doing here?"

The caretaker didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he bent down to pull up a weed. "I know there are droids who do this work," he said. "But I don't trust them to do the job right. Droids can malfunction."

Ferus nodded. "Happens all the time."

"Even security droids. They can go off-line for no reason, for fifteen minutes at a time. Takes me that long to reset the system." He tossed a weed into his basket. "They have me in charge of security here, mostly because there's nothing to steal, so far. I'm at the east end of the factory. It's quiet down there. I just monitor the security system. Round about three in the morning, I get too tired to even make my rounds."

He picked up his tools. "Got to take work where you can get it, these days. I just keep my head down and don't make a fuss. About anything."

"Good policy." Ferus glanced over at the loading dock as a transport began to land. "Well, I'd better get going."

"My name's Russell," the caretaker said. He looked at him for the first time. "I'm glad to meet you, Ferus Olin."

Flame was meeting with Wil, Amie, Trever, Dona, and several members of the Eleven when Roan and Dona returned to the safe house.

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"This is remarkable," Amie told him when he came in. "Flame has enormous resources at her disposal. Her ideas about networking planetary resistance are quite detailed."

"I can go over what you missed, if you'd like," Flame told Roan.

"I'm sorry, I don't have time. I need to ask you to leave for a few minutes."

Roan's authority was absolute, and no one questioned him. Flame stood and walked toward the door, but hesitated. "I can help," she said. "Whatever it is, I can help."

"This is Bellassan business," Roan said.

"But my point is that it's not just Bellassan business," Flame said. She linked her hands together and held them up. "Every planet's resistance should be part of the next one, and so on."

"She's right, Roan," Amie said.

"I appreciate your philosophy," Roan said. "It's a subject for discussion. But right now I need a closed meeting."

Flame nodded her head and slipped out the door.

"Why'd you have to do that, Roan?" Trever burst out. "She could help!"

Roan gave him a look that silenced him. "This is too important to risk, Trever. Ferus has contacted me."

"Maybe Ferus shouldn't be the one that you're trusting," Trever said heatedly.

"He *had* to send you away, Trever," Roan said.

"That isn't what this is about."

"He thought he was protecting you. You were the first thing he asked about when he saw me." Roan's voice was gentle. "If trust were easy, it wouldn't be so valuable. Think of the man you know, and ask yourself if he could betray us."

Trever couldn't hold Roan's gaze. He ducked his head. He felt ashamed. There was so much trust in this room that he was able to connect with it again.

Wil and Amie looked at Roan. "What happened?" Wil asked him.

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“Ferus contacted me. It’s tonight,” he said. “He has some sort of contact at the factory who will help us.”

“Good,” Wil said.

“The question is, who should go? We only have a fifteen-minute window. Ferus’s contact will shut down security at three in the morning. We could open this up to more members of the Eleven, but it would take time to set up. I think a three-person team makes sense. We can do more exploring that way. We’ll hit the computer system and search the main office. Wil, you’re out because of your injury. And, Dona, there’s nobody better I’d want watching my back, but you don’t have experience with this kind of thing. So anybody want to volunteer?”

Everyone raised a hand. Even Dona.

Roan smiled and leaned back. “All I can say is, it’s good to be back on Bellassa.”

“I should go,” Trever said. “I know how to work with Ferus. I know what he’s thinking, and believe it or not, I can obey orders.”

“I want to go,” Amie said. “I have got the most scientific background. If we’re lucky enough to get into the computer files, I can translate any technical jargon.”

Amie and Roan looked at Trever.

“Don’t say I’m too young, because that always sends me into a full-scale laser cannon mode,” Trever said. “Besides, I’m better at sneaking in and out of places than all of you put together.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Roan said.

“All right, it’s decided,” Wil said. “Roan, Amie, and Trever. Tonight.”

Chapter Sixteen

In his rough traveler's clothes, Ry-Gaul looked like countless others, beings uprooted by the Clone Wars and the Imperial takeover and looking for a place to call home again. But as she walked beside him, Solace could feel the strength of the Force.

"How did you escape Order Sixty-six?" Solace asked.

"I was on a secret mission," he said. "Only Yoda knew about it. I was on a world in the Outer Rim, under cover. I left Tru Veld at the Temple. He was working on a valuable research project."

"The Temple was invaded," Solace said. "Everyone was killed."

Ry-Gaul closed his eyes for a moment. "I thought he'd be safer at the Temple. If he'd come with me, he would be alive."

"Decisions are not for regret, but for understanding," Solace said. The familiar words of a Jedi saying felt soothing in her mouth.

"I heard the lies the Empire was spreading about the Jedi one day in a cantina," he said. "I realized that everyone I knew was dead." He looked down at his large, white hands. "I wanted to go back to Coruscant immediately, but I was almost caught at a checkpoint as I tried to make my way there. A couple—a man and wife—rescued me. They smuggled me back to their

Jude Watson

homeworld and offered me a place to stay. They were scientists. They found me a new identity, and I was readying myself to leave again when they disappeared. I've been looking for them ever since."

"Well, you've attracted the notice of the Empire," Solace told him.

"I know. But I couldn't stop looking. The more I looked, the more I uncovered. Other scientists are missing. Some go willingly. Others seem to have been forced. And I'm sure the Empire is behind it."

"They're using them for something," Solace said, looking at the others. "We have to tell Dex about this."

"Ferus should know about it, too," Clive said. "It might help him on Bellassa."

"We're close to the Orange District," Solace said. "You'll be safe there."

They took a lift tube down a hundred levels to the Orange District. They walked quickly through the passages, taking the smaller streets. They approached the long, serpentine alley where Dex's safe house was located.

"Look, there's Lune," Astri said, a surge of happiness lighting her voice.

She started toward the group. Solace tensed. She noticed that Curran and Keets were careful to keep him in front of them, shielding him from the street. Instead of turning into the alley, they went left.

"Astri, wait," Solace said. "Something's wrong."

It was an absolute rule that anyone who suspected they were followed must not turn down the alley. It could expose Dex's safe house.

Worried now, Solace split off from the group and quickened her pace.

She was too late.

The stormtroopers burst out of an unmarked airspeeder and released seeker droids with blasters into the air. The blasterfire

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caught Curran, who went down. Keets wheeled around, holding Lune tightly against him. Solace leaped toward the airspeeder, her lightsaber held aloft.

Behind her she could sense Ry-Gaul moving. She knew he was positioning himself to flank her.

But they were too far away, and too late. Keets was overpowered by the stormtroopers. Lune was wrenched away. The boy didn't make a sound.

It was Astri, on her knees, whose wailing cry of anguish split the air as Lune disappeared into the crowded sky.

Chapter Seventeen

Ferus waited by the garden wall. It didn't take long until three shapes materialized out of the darkness. Roan, Trever, and Amie.

"You took your time finding me again," he told Trever. He squeezed the boy's shoulders, glad to see him looking so well.

"You're the one who keeps disappearing." Trever felt better, just seeing Ferus once more. He couldn't believe he had suspected him. One suspicion had led to another until his mind was crammed full of doubt. He didn't know how it had started, but he was glad it was over.

"This door," Ferus said, leading the way.

As soon as they were inside, Ferus took them to the central office where he'd seen Moff Tarkin. Then he pointed out the scientist's meeting rooms and labs.

"I'll take the labs," Amie said.

"I'm going to check out the computer in the hangar," Trever said. "Flight records might tell us something."

"I'll try the main computer," Roan said. "Come on, Ferus."

It was like old times. Ferus and Roan hit the keyboards under pressure, trying to track down secrets. Once it had been from dishonest multisystem corporations, and now it was from an empire they were certain was choking the life and heart of the galaxy.

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"I'm going to key in *Despayre* and see what I get," Roan said. "After you mentioned it, I researched it but didn't find much. Outer Rim planet, in the Horuz system, a penal colony...a curious lack of real information."

"I'm going to take a look at Tarkin's files, see if I can access anything," Ferus said.

For long seconds there was only the clicking of keys and buttons.

Suddenly, Roan whistled. Ferus knew that whistle. Roan was busy whipping out his datapad.

"That probably has a safety wipe on it," Ferus warned. "If you try to download information, it will erase itself."

"Disabled it. Don't you remember how very good I am at this?" Roan grinned as he flipped through the data. "This is interesting...I've got a memo from Tarkin to the factory manager telling him to bypass normal safeguards for any workers. We can release this information and bust a big smoking hole in their 'we're here for the betterment of Bellassa' spacejunk."

Ferus returned his attention to his own search. "Weapons delivery system," he said. "That's what they must be working on. I've got orders for high-functioning engineering droids....Whoa—a shipment of Loquasin and Titroxinate." He paused. "Some of these memos have been forwarded to ZA."

"Friend of yours?"

"There's only one ZA. Jenna Zan Arbor. Galactic criminal and all-around vicious rival."

"Sounds like they're working on weapons here as well as infrastructure. That's totally against what they said."

"With false labels...it's all undercover."

Just then Amie entered. "We've got about four more minutes," she said. "I'm finding out some strange stuff. It's not so much what they're working on as the scale of it. Like they're planning to take over an entire planet and redo its infrastructure or something..."

Jude Watson

“Take a look at this,” Ferus said, tilting the data-screen toward her.

She read it swiftly. “This is similar to some of the methods they’ve used on torture victims, Roan included,” she said. “Totally against the regulations the Senate passed generations ago.”

“The Emperor doesn’t believe in following regulations,” Roan said. “He lets the Senate pass them and then ignores them. It’s a convenient version of democracy.”

“And it’s all for the good of the galaxy, remember?” Ferus said. “We’d better get out of here. Time’s up. I think we have enough. Where’s Trever?”

“Late, as usual,” Roan said, shutting down the computer. “Let’s meet him at the door.”

Running now, with the sense of the chrono ticking the time away, they reached the exit door, but no one was there.

Roan let out an exasperated sound. They had less than a minute now. Where was Trever?

Chapter Eighteen

Trever didn't learn anything on the hangar computer. He wasn't a whiz like Roan. He'd picked up a couple of hacking techniques from Ferus, but he wasn't a mastermind.

So he did what came naturally—he snooped. In his experience, information was often not hidden in computers. It was around the next turning in the hall, or behind a closed door.

He had only ten minutes, but he could cover a lot of ground in ten minutes. Trever hoofed it down the hallway, peeking into offices and laboratories, looking for something. He didn't know what it was, but he'd know when he found it.

He turned a corner and stopped. He was at the opposite end of the factory complex now. It should be deserted. But his senses told him otherwise. It wasn't as though he heard something or saw something. He *felt* something.

He shook his head. Was that Force bunkum starting to work on him? No, it wasn't that. It was his street instincts. He trusted them just as much as Ferus-Wan trusted his Force.

He stopped and held his breath. Closed his eyes.

Whoosh, ah. Whoosh, ah.

Well, this was a new moon day. Darth Vader. Just what he needed.

Jude Watson

He shrank back, moving quietly. There was an equipment closet to his right, and if he could just sneak into it and get out his comlink to warn the others, he just might make it out of here alive. Except that they were on comlink silence, because they figured communications could be intercepted in an Imperial facility.

He eased into the closet and kept the door open a crack. How lucky could a guy get, meeting up with Lord-on-High Vader again?

He watched as Vader swept down the hall, waved his gloved hand over a sensor, and walked into an office.

Russell Wake had always tried to stay out of politics. He was fortunate to live on Bellassa, for it made it easy, at least before the Clone Wars. Rulers were elected, and the normal ebb and flow of scandal and missed opportunities, corruption, and grandstanding, was easy to ignore. Even when the Clone Wars began, he found himself able to avoid taking a position. He couldn't get excited about fighting Separatists, for they were fighting a Senate that was riddled with greed and corruption. Who could say they were wrong?

Then the Empire took over. And suddenly everything he valued in his life was thrown away. The Emperor turned his stone-gray gaze on Bellassa and deemed it worthy of conquest and example. He wanted to install a governor, and the Bellassans objected. And once that objection registered as solid opposition, the Empire had to come down on them.

They had underestimated the opposition.

And though he tried to keep out of it, Russell Wake's old heart was stirred. Freedom became more than a concept to him; it was a reality as firm as the turborake he held in his hands.

The things he counted on had disappeared. The quarrelsome politicians, silenced. The press, shut down. Once the Empire had moved its garrison in and controlled the government, people

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were imprisoned without trial or charges; fear ruled the city, and those who ran the government were replaced if they protested.

But if Russell was moved to care about all this, it didn't mean he ever wanted to fight it. Resistance members had physical courage. Russell could show no mercy when it came to a weed choking his silverbloom bush, but he knew very well he would crumble under any real danger. The idea of joining a resistance movement was never in his plans.

Until he walked through a door and saw Ferus Olin.

So now he sat here, his palms slick with sweat, and waited for Ferus and his crew to do whatever they needed. He had given them fifteen minutes. Surely he could hold his nerves steady for fifteen minutes.

If only they weren't such long minutes....

His door hissed open, and he shot out of his chair so fast he smashed his knees on the console.

His worst fear stood in his doorway.

"You seem...nervous this evening," Darth Vader said.

His heart was pounding, slamming against his chest so hard, surely it was visible. He couldn't seem to find his breath. "It's a long night," he said.

Somehow, even while his heart was slamming and his breath was gone and his mouth was as dry as a desert planet, somehow he managed to stand up, right in front of the console where the indicator light shone yellow, indicating a problem with security, and block it.

"You were seen talking to Ferus Olin today," Darth Vader said.

He pretended to look blank for a moment. "Oh, yes." So this was what it was, just a regular inquisition. He'd heard Vader liked to question beings at odd hours, keep them off balance. He cleared his throat. *Don't clear your throat, it makes you sound guilty.* "In the garden. For a few minutes."

"What did you discuss?"

"Gardening."

Jude Watson

Suddenly Russell felt an odd constriction in his throat. His hand flew up to loosen his tunic.

“It is not your clothing,” Darth Vader said.

The constriction grew. He was croaking out a breath now.

It wasn’t as though Russell’s life flashed before his eyes. It wasn’t as though he remembered everything from birth until this moment. He thought of his wife, and he thought of his daughter, and he thought of the courage he thought he didn’t have, and suddenly, there it was, in his hands. Courage and defiance and pride.

“I have nothing...to tell....”

He stared into the black visor, heard the rushing sound of Vader’s breath. He felt an emptiness, as if the creature so casually choking the life out of him had no feelings about it whatsoever. He closed his eyes so he could block out that merciless void. Instead he pictured the things that nourished him. His garden. His wife. His daughter.

He was traveling down a rushing tunnel of black. Sparks shooting out of his fingers, his heels. No pain now.

He just wished...he just wished someone could know this.

He’d found his courage in the end.

Ferus saw immediately that the hangar was empty. He took off down the hall. He was almost to the north-east section when he saw Trever running full tilt toward him, his hair dripping with sweat.

“Vader,” he gasped out.

“Where?”

Trever pointed with his chin. “He went to an office, asked questions about you...from some old guy—”

“Russell.” Ferus started to take off, but Trever called to him.

“It’s too late.” Ferus turned. Trever’s face was ashen. “He questioned him, but Russell didn’t say anything...so...” Trever gulped in air. “I saw it. I saw it all, Ferus!”

Ferus saw that the boy was close to the edge. He had seen so many things, but he hadn’t yet seen this—the casual destruction

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of a living being, face-to-face, for no other motive than to extract a piece of information.

Ferus grabbed Trevor and hurried him toward the laboratory. He brought him to a small room filled with equipment. "Stay here. Don't move. I'll get you when it's safe. And take this." Ferus handed Trevor the information chip from Roan's datapad. "Hide it."

"But what..."

"Wil has to see it. If I don't come back, get yourself to the hangar just before daybreak. There will be transports coming in and out. Try to sneak aboard—you're good at that. I should be able to come back and get you."

"But what will you—"

"Trevor, there's no time. One of us has to get out. It might have to be you. Just one thing—stay away from Vader!"

Ferus took off. He at least had to ensure Trevor's safety. He was too late for Russell.

He ran back the way he had come, thinking fast. He couldn't fight Vader; he didn't have the skill. He would, if it were a last resort. But his best strategy now would be to bluff. He had to remember that as far as Vader knew, he was loyal to the Empire.

He raced down the last hallway, turning toward the door where Roan and Amie waited. He skidded to a halt. Darth Vader stood between him and his friends.

Vader didn't turn. "Ah, Olin has joined us. Perhaps you can explain what these thieves are doing here."

"I was asked by the Emperor to keep an eye on security here," Ferus said, improvising. Vader wouldn't be able to check until later. And later Ferus would be back underground or off-planet.

If it worked.

"I can take them into custody," he said.

Vader half turned. "Do you think I do not recognize Roan Lands? Do you think I would be foolish enough to let you take him away?"

"He is a former associate, yes, but—"

Jude Watson

It happened before he could get out another word. Faster than an eyeblink. Faster than he'd seen anyone move, anyone except Yoda.

The lightsaber hadn't been there, and then it was, and the lightsaber was a blur. Vader moved without seeming to move, and the lightsaber sliced into Roan, straight into his chest. Straight into his heart.

Roan fell to his knees. At first, pain filmed his gaze but he didn't flinch, he just looked at Ferus. Looked long and hard and said many things in the space of a second.

Don't give yourself away for me.

Amie cried out and knelt to support Roan. Ferus ran forward and caught him as he fell. He didn't care about his cover, he didn't even care about Roan's warning, he only knew the remarkable pain he felt.

Roan reached out for Ferus's forearm, his fingers slipping off. Ferus picked up Roan's hand and placed it on his arm. Then he put his hand on Roan's other arm in their private greeting, their private farewell. He squeezed Roan's arm, wishing he could pass his strength into him.

He'd seen enough of death to know it was too late.

"Farewell, brother," he whispered.

He felt Roan's spirit lift, he felt it fly.

And he was left alone.

So alone that there was no thought, only rage so black it blotted everything else out.

He launched himself at Darth Vader, his lightsaber in his hand.

Chapter Nineteen

His lightsaber came down on empty air.

He thought he'd have the element of surprise, at least, but Vader had expected the attack. He had *wanted* it. He had provoked it. He had killed Roan to provoke Ferus. There was no other explanation for it, and it served to fuel Ferus's rage.

Roan had died for *this*?

Ferus heard Amie shout, but he couldn't focus on anything but his own need to plunge his lightsaber deep into Vader. He whirled and attacked again, but Vader again was gone, moving with a speed and lightness that was surprising considering his body armor.

Ferus felt the dark side of the Force fill the air, choking him. And suddenly his body was wrenched forward, and he hung in the air like a puppet. He looked down at Vader's helmet.

"I am bored," Darth Vader said. He placed his glowing lightsaber against Ferus's neck.

Ferus waited to be killed. He looked into that helmet and felt the stirring of something...*personal*. A hatred deep in a black heart, a hatred so big it was directed not so much at Ferus but at what he *represented*.

What is the source of his hate?

Jude Watson

Stormtroopers suddenly filled the hallway, their blaster rifles held in attack mode. Ferus felt the grip of the Force ease, and he crashed to the floor.

“Take him. And her. And take that one away.” Vader’s order was crisp.

“And the weapon, sir?”

Vader turned and looked down at the lightsaber hilt still in Ferus’s hand. “He can keep it. As a reminder of his failure.”

He turned and walked down the hall and disappeared.

The stormtroopers dragged Roan away like a sack of grain.

Ferus felt them lift him, force him to walk alongside Amie. Prison again. Execution, most certainly.

He didn’t care.

Chapter Twenty

Trever hadn't strictly told the truth in the meeting with the Eleven. He wasn't that good at obeying orders. He'd never been able to stay put just because someone asked him to. Even Ferus couldn't make him do that.

So he watched from around the corner and saw it all. He saw the shock of Vader's action. He saw Roan crash to his knees. He saw Ferus charge, and he waited for Ferus to die.

He couldn't stop shaking.

He thought he'd seen everything. He thought he could handle anything. But he felt as though his mind had broken after seeing this night.

She found him in the laboratory, a tall, slender woman in a dark-red tunic that reached to her knees. When she opened the door, a shaft of light hit his face. He turned away but didn't move. He couldn't imagine running anymore.

She knelt in front of him. "Well, hello."

He put his face against his knees.

"Security is all over the building," she murmured. "I heard there was a break-in. Some prisoners taken. I'll help you."

He looked up.

"I'm just as much a prisoner as you are," she said. "But I'll try to get you out."

Jude Watson

"I'm supposed to go to the hangar," he said. "Before dawn."

"I can do that. I have clearance. Can you walk?"

Of course he could walk. But when he stood, his legs were shaking. Her hand was cool as she curled her fingers around his. She squeezed his hand lightly.

It was that touch that brought him back. He had felt so alone. He had needed to connect to something, even if it was just a touch from a stranger.

She nodded reassuringly at him, and she rolled a cart toward him with a large canister on it. "Can you fit?"

He climbed in. He drew up his knees and tightened himself into a ball. The durasteel walls of the canister were cold. She slid the top on, leaving a crevice for him to breathe.

"Here we go."

She started the repulsorlift motor, and Trever felt the hum come up through the bottom of the canister. He felt himself move, felt every turn of the hallway. Then something changed—the light, the noise—and he knew he was in the hangar.

"Leaving this for disposal," the woman said. "Class D, toxic, so not to be opened."

"Affirmative." The clipped, mechanical-sounding voice of a stormtrooper.

And then the lid was slid back. He looked up into lovely dark eyes.

"This will be loaded onto a gravsled and taken back to the battalion. It's done by droids, so wait until they're busy negotiating air traffic. Just be sure and get off before it goes to the garrison. Good luck, whoever you are."

"Wait." He put his hand up to stop the canister lid from sliding back. "You've planned this already. This was your escape route."

She bit her lip. "Yes."

"But once I do it, you won't be able to take it."

She met his gaze for a long moment. He saw that she was giving up something that kept her going, gave her a reason to

hope. If things became too bad, she would always be able to escape. Now she had no hope.

“Just go,” she said, and closed the lid.

He rested his cheek against the cool metal. He felt no fear. He was ready for whatever came. He was so tired of running.

Soon he was lifted and smashed down again. He felt the lurch of the gravsled as it moved.

He waited until he heard the sounds of heavy air traffic, pedestrians, the city of Ussa coming to life. Even without being able to see, he was able to track their progress through the city just by listening for familiar sounds. He waited until he was certain they were in the center of the city, the most populous district of Bluestone, and then he eased open the lid. The droids were simple service droids, but they had blasters built into their trunks. Now they were busy monitoring air traffic and controlling the gravsled. He wiggled out of the canister. A passing airspeeder pilot noted him, but this was Bellassa, where every citizen kept his or her mouth shut, so he looked away.

Crouching behind the canister, Trever waited for the next traffic stop. Then he leaped off the gravsled. It was about eight meters to the ground, and he hit hard, feeling the shock in his knees. But he rolled and stood up quickly.

He lost himself in the surging crowd. The sounds of the city were familiar and comforted him. He made his way to the safe house. As he drew near, his steps dragged. He didn’t want to break the news. He didn’t want to say it out loud.

Wil opened the door. He grabbed Trever by the elbows and pulled him inside. “What happened? Where’s Amie?”

“Captured.”

Wil sagged against the wall. “I’ve been up all night...waiting. Roan?”

“Ferus was captured, too. Vader was there.”

Slowly, Wil straightened. “Roan.”

“Dead.” Trever felt his mouth twist out of shape.

Jude Watson

He heard a moan, and Dona entered, her hands against her mouth.

Wil, who was always so strong, shocked Trever by simply lowering himself to the hallway floor. He put his head in his hands.

Wil had always been so brusque and remote. He was a legendary figure in Ussa, one of the founding members of the Eleven. Trever had never known that he could be overcome like this. It added to his own fear, and he started to shake again.

Dona put her strong hand on his shoulder. "Come on."

He followed her into the house. She pushed him down on a sleep couch and covered him with two blankets. "You need to get warm."

Trever realized how cold he was.

She disappeared and came back with a mug of scalding tea. "Drink this."

"I can't."

Wil appeared. He crossed the room and crouched down next to him. "It happens sometimes after a battle. The shaking. You'll be all right."

Trever hid his face from Wil.

"It's happened to me," Wil said. "More than once. So don't be ashamed."

Wil disappeared again. Trever drank the tea, not tasting it, just feeling the warmth spread out through his bones.

It seemed to take a long while before Wil reappeared.

"It's on the HoloNet now. They're bragging about it." Wil looked as though he'd aged ten years in the past half hour.

"I saw Roan die," Trever said. "Vader acted so fast. No one expected it. Roan didn't even have a blaster in his hand—" He saw anguish mirrored in Wil's eyes.

Roan had tossed him bakery rolls for breakfast and advice when he needed it. He'd let him sleep in the office when it was cold and looked the other way if Trever lifted a few credits on his way out the door. And then, when Trever was no longer a petty

thief but a fellow resistance fighter, he had never made him feel less than anybody else. He had accepted him. Together with Ferus, he was the closest to family that Trever had known since his own family had died, every last one of them. Mother. Father. Brother. Roan.

He reached into his tunic to the pocket that lay against his skin. He pulled out the chip and handed it to Wil. "There's something on it. Something they were able to discover."

Wil took it. "At least we have this."

Trever looked up. He could feel something clenched inside him, something unfamiliar, and he realized it was fear that had dug in, that might never leave. "Wil," he whispered, "for the first time...I think we might lose."

Wil's hand tightened on him. "We won't lose. But I have to get you off-planet."

Trever straightened. "No!"

"I contacted Flame. You're both going to Coruscant."

"I want to help here!"

"You can't, Trever. It's only a matter of time before they start looking for you, too. They've traced the vehicle that you and Amie and Roan took to the factory, and they know you were part of the group. There was a hidden security cam at a checkpoint. Flame has volunteered to get you off-planet, and Dexter Jettster has agreed to allow both of you to enter his safe house on Coruscant. You have friends there who are waiting for you."

Trever looked from Wil to Dona. What they weren't saying, but what he knew, was that if he insisted on remaining, he would endanger all of them. He had to find the courage not to stay but to leave.

He rarely thought about whether he was brave. He had bounced from one situation to another and held himself together more out of stubbornness than anything else. Courage didn't live in him, the way it had lived in Roan. Trever knew now that he had never been brave before, only ignorant. Despite the battles

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he'd seen, the things he'd witnessed, he'd never truly realized what he was up against until last night.

He couldn't find his courage. He just had to accept his fear. And keep on going.

He nodded his agreement. In his heart he said his first good-bye to Roan. He knew that letting go of Roan would be done by centimeters, a small bit at a time.

But he did not say good-bye to Ferus. He would see him again. If he let go of that hope, he would let go of too much.

During the flight to Coruscant, Flame let him be, allowing a comfortable silence that gave him room to sleep and try to eat and gather himself for whatever came next. Dex had arranged a landing site for her, and she concealed the ship in a hangar that held many battered, and no doubt unregistered, vehicles.

"Coruscant is finding ways to get around the Empire," Trever said, looking around.

"It's inevitable," Flame said. "Even a powerful government can't patrol every centimeter of space." She turned to him. "We find the places they can't get to, and we hide there."

Trever thought of the asteroid base. A tiny wisp of hope, as ghostly as smoke, twined through him. He climbed out of the starship and trailed behind Flame as she strode toward the turbolift.

They descended to the Orange District. Trever remembered the way. He never forgot a route. He led the way now, through the twisting amber-toned streets, to the alley full of switchbacks and dead ends that led to Dex's safe house.

They walked into chaos. Astri stood, straining to get around Oryon, who was blocking the door with his large frame. Keets sat on the steps, his head in his hands. Curran, his shoulder bandaged, leaned against the wall. And Dex in a repulsorlift chair, floated nearby, his four hands gesticulating, one pair clasped, the other waving.

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“Astri, we can help you if you let us,” Dex was saying. “We need a plan.”

“I can do it myself. We’re wasting time!” Astri stamped her boot. “With every second you’re holding me back, they’re taking him away! He could be off-planet at any moment, he could be anywhere!”

“What happened to Lune?” Trever asked, stricken. No one answered him.

“We know where he is.” Curran’s voice was soft. “That’s what we’re trying to tell you.”

“Where is he?” Astri wheeled to confront him.

“We need a plan,” Oryon repeated. “You can’t go there and...”

“Where is he?” Astri screamed.

“He’s been taken to the Imperial Naval Academy,” Dex said. “He’s been enrolled.”

“Bog,” Astri said bitterly. “I knew he was behind this; I just didn’t think he could have the wits to pull it off.”

“He didn’t need wits, he needed resources,” Clive said. “He has that now. Sano Sauro is in charge of the academy. It’s a demotion for him, but Bog and Sauro are allies from way back, as you know.”

“You can’t go running there by yourself,” Dex said. “There’s high security all around it. Even parents can’t get in if they don’t have clearance. And you *won’t* have clearance.”

“So what’s your great plan?” Astri asked, a challenge in her voice. Her chin lifted, and her eyes flashed her defiance. Trever could see she didn’t trust anyone to go after Lune but herself.

The others exchanged glances. “Well, we don’t have one yet,” Oryon admitted. “We just discovered where he was a few minutes ago.”

“Astri, my lovely, you’ve got to trust us,” Clive said. “Such as we are. Look around. We have plenty of skills here. We’ll figure it out. We’ll get him back. All of us.”

Jude Watson

Keet's voice was hoarse. "It's a promise. I'll die trying, but I'll get him back to you."

"I don't need promises. I need to go. I have to go get him." Astri's eyes filled with tears. "You think he's so strong, and he is. But he's still a boy. He can still be afraid. I have to try, I'll say I'm his mother, I'll demand—"

"That's just what Bog wants you to do," Oryon said firmly. "If you show up, you'll be arrested in the time it takes you to walk up the ramp."

Astri's body suddenly collapsed in on itself, and she folded herself in two, crouching near the floor, her forehead against her clenched hands.

Everyone began to talk at once, about the academy's location, probable security, where to procure a getaway vehicle, if the delivery services would be vulnerable to infiltration.

Trever stepped forward. "I have a plan," he said.

Everyone stopped talking. Everyone looked at him.

"I'll enlist," he said.

Chapter Twenty-One

Again and again Ferus relived the moment when the lightsaber went through Roan's body. Again and again he felt the shock of it. Again and again he wondered if he could have moved, if he could have foreseen it, if he hadn't been so stupid, so slow, so convinced that Darth Vader would follow procedure, instead of striking out at a man who held no weapon against him.

He was in a cell, alone. He lay on the hard ferrocrete floor, his cheek against it. He knew why Vader had let him keep his lightsaber. It was a taunt. Vader knew it would torture Ferus to feel its familiar weight on his belt, to put his fingers on its handle, and know that his training had meant nothing. His lightsaber was useless. Vader was right.

Somewhere above him was sky and space and countless stars, and he was just a particle in the galaxy, and he was alone. Roan was gone. Their friendship had been full of separations, but they had always found each other again. They had trusted each other and watched each other's backs, and in one moment of criminally stupid miscalculation he had underestimated his opponent, and because of that, Roan was dead.

Because of him.

Life would go on around him, but he wouldn't be the same. He turned a different face to the galaxy now. The grief had

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changed him forever. He felt that as clearly as he could feel the ferrocrete against his cheek.

Roan's death had introduced fear to his life. His powers were so puny compared to what he faced. His will had carried him through. Now he realized that in the most secret recesses of his heart, he had held out one hope. That one day this would be over and he could go back to his life with Roan. He hadn't known the meaning of family when he'd been with the Jedi, but now he did, and the loss of it was impossible to bear.

Which proved he wasn't a Jedi. Attachment shouldn't be his reason for going on.

If he wasn't a Jedi, what was he?

And what did it matter? For soon he'd be dead. How curious to feel that he wouldn't mind.

But before they killed him, he would replay Roan's death again and again.

The lightsaber moved so fast, it was as though it jumped from Vader's hand. The mortal strike was assured and driven by the Force, the dark side that surrounded Vader and pulsed steadily from him. He had only been a blur.

Ferus suddenly sat up. He had heard a voice as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud.

Break it down, Ferus.

Obi-Wan? That was what he would say, in that cool way that could be so annoying.

Break down the movement; don't see it as a blur. You're a Jedi—yes, you are!—so be a Jedi.

He didn't feel like a Jedi. But he would obey that voice and try to break it down.

He closed his eyes and grabbed the memory. This time he struggled to leave his feelings behind. He had to see it clear.

He saw Darth Vader move now. He saw the curl of his cape. The way he turned his body, the position of his feet, the way his arm moved. He had used a classic Jedi shun move, rotating the

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lightsaber 360 degrees, but the rotation had moved so fast he'd been unable to track it.

Break it down.

Form IV. Then Form VII, the most advanced Jedi form. Done aggressively, with impeccable control.

Coldness gripped his heart. Jedi moves.

The movement had been done with a grace and finesse that rendered it not part of a drill but part of Vader's body. He brought an individual flair to it that made it his own.

Something familiar about that form. An aggression, a confidence...It struck a memory he couldn't touch. But who could it be?

If he could only know how old Vader was. Had he been on the Council? Such expertise suggested it.

I know him. I know the way he moves.

But everyone he'd studied with was dead. He couldn't say for certain that every Jedi he'd ever met was dead, but he knew the fate of all the Padawans. It had to have been an instructor, or perhaps a Jedi Master who had been away for long periods, so long he had lost his connection to the Jedi Temple, and Palpatine had exploited it...

How could a Jedi be turned? It didn't seem possible, not to any Jedi he had personally known.

His door hissed open. Emperor Palpatine himself stood in the doorway, flanked by Red Guards.

Ferus rose to his feet.

Palpatine swept in, his hands hidden in the folds of his robes. The guards stayed outside as the door hissed closed.

"I am considering your fate," he said.

Ferus didn't react. He waited for the trap.

"It was a regrettable incident. Apparently you noted the security breach—although you lied about my asking you to monitor security. Perhaps we can accept that you were zealous in your desire to impress me—and unfortunately those who broke in were known to you. Naturally, Lord Vader believes that you

Jude Watson

were part of the mission, and I must say, in a contest between his word and yours he will win.”

Ferus wondered what Palpatine was getting to.

“And the fact that you took arms against Lord Vader is, of course, grounds for execution in itself. Yet.”

Palpatine walked a few steps closer. Ferus wished he wouldn’t. The air around him was so foul.

“I will confide in you that lately I feel that Lord Vader has been overreaching his authority. The killing of Roan Lands, for example. Very bad. We are in the midst of a delicate operation here on Bellassa. We want the support of the people. Support for the resistance was weakening, and now it will be inflamed again. Very unfortunate. It is my task to achieve stability in the galaxy. This means I am allowed to break the rules. The rules, for example, about punishment for attacking an Imperial high officer.”

Ferus still didn’t speak. He would let this play out. He had no interest in what Palpatine would say. He was done playing this game.

“If only I had someone I could really trust,” Palpatine said. “Someone who understood my goals. If I found that someone, the gifts I could give him would be...immense.”

Ferus looked away. He wished Palpatine would stop talking.

“The power over life and death,” Palpatine said.

Ferus didn’t turn, but he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

“Ah, I see I have your full attention at last. I can teach you things that will make you more powerful than Vader. It will take time. But only time.”

More powerful than Vader. Was it possible?

“Yes, it is possible,” Palpatine said. “For I created him, did I not?” He took another small step toward Ferus. This time Ferus didn’t shrink back.

“You have the potential to be the greatest Jedi ever known,” Palpatine hissed. “You have all the raw materials. You only lack

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training. You will be able to use the Force in ways you never dreamed of.”

Palpatine paused, letting his words hang in the air.

“Too much to grasp, is it? Let us take it step-by-step, then. First, I will put the Inquisitors at your disposal. Senator Sano Sauro has a plan to gather Force-adepts. Lord Vader isn’t interested in this, but it has possibilities. But *you* could take over the search for the Force-adepts. With the help of Inquisitors. Sauro is getting nowhere because he doesn’t understand the Force. It takes a Force-adept to find one.”

He could do this. He could gather the Force-adepts, and instead of turning them over, he could bring them to the asteroid.

And all the while he would be growing more powerful. Until he could challenge Lord Vader himself.

This time he would not find himself hanging in the air like a useless, boneless thing, at Vader’s mercy.

This time he would be the one to surprise Vader. Vader would be the helpless one. And Roan would be avenged.

Vader had made him a broken man, but he could be put back together.

He met Palpatine’s gaze for the first time. He looked into the dark pits of his eyes.

“I’m ready to learn,” he said.

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

AGAINST THE EMPIRE

BY JUDE WATSON

Disney

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Chapter One

His short life had been marked by megatons of bad luck, but at least Trever counted himself lucky in one respect: Regular attendance at the Ussan Day Academy was no longer required.

When his father and brother were killed by Imperial forces after the Clone Wars, his world had imploded. Everything had stopped making sense, and going to school had made the least sense of all. So he had closed the door to his old life and left it forever. He'd become a street kid, a thief, a con. Then he'd found out that Ferus Olin, the guy who let him sleep in his back room, used to be a Jedi, and the next thing he knew...*wha-woosh*, he was running blockades and dodging stormtroopers.

Top of the list of things he never expected to do again: go to school. So much for *that* idea. He was now a fresh recruit at the Imperial Naval Academy on Coruscant. Why couldn't he have gone undercover someplace *fun*, like a space station cantina in the Outer Rim?

Because Lune Oddo Divinian, the Force-sensitive son of Astri Oddo, had been kidnapped by his father and sent here. And Astri was frantic to get him back. So Trever had offered to enroll, make contact, and get both of them out in a couple days' time.

At least that was the plan.

Jude Watson

To Trever, school had always felt like jail. But the Imperial Naval Academy *really* felt like jail. There were no stun cuffs or energy cages, but there was a state-of-the-art security system, ID badges, and old B-1 series battle droids from the Clone Wars that had been reactivated and reprogrammed for security. They were still in temporary quarters that the Empire had requisitioned, an old hospital built of gray synthstone. The place had no windows and still smelled of bacta.

He looked like every single one of these other recruits, with freshly-trimmed hair cut close to his skull, tunic and pants the color of a swamp, and the stupidest little cap he'd ever had the misfortune to have plopped on his head. Trever slipped it off and crammed it into his pocket. He had left behind his clothes and possessions at the check-in, and now he had to find his quarters.

The halls were empty at the moment. It was class time. All of the recruits were sweating over holo-books, and soon he'd be joining them for some new-moon fun.

"Hey, gravel-maggot!" the sharp voice called from behind him.

Trever kept walking. He wasn't here to become involved in student disputes.

"I'm talking to you, gravel-maggot!"

Unless, of course, some idiot bully tried to get in his face.

Trever turned. A tall recruit with three silver bars on his chest stared him down.

Keep your cool, Keets Freely had instructed him. Keets had researched an article on the Imperial Academy when it was still in the planning stages. Back when Keets was a journalist, before he'd managed to get a death-mark on his head after he'd angered the Empire several times. *You're a new recruit. You're the bottom of the heap. Just about everyone is allowed to torture you. It's part of the process. They want to turn you into an Imperial. They want to break you down and build you up again. Whatever you do, don't lose your temper.*

"Where's your cap, gravel-maggot?"

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Oh. The cap. Trever reached into his pocket and took it out.

"You're required to wear it at all times."

"Nobody told me. Sorry. I just got here a couple of minutes ago," Trever said.

"Put it on now, gravel-maggot!" The tall recruit slapped it out of his hand and it fell on the floor.

"Now that was counterproductive," Trever said.

An interesting thing happened when this particular recruit got upset. His cheeks went pale but his neck flushed. If Trever had been on the streets of Ussa, he'd comment on it. Call the guy a ruby-throated kete and take off. Trever was a better runner than a fighter.

What bullies didn't understand was that you had to *particularize* your insults. Anybody could call anybody a gravel-maggot, for moon's sake.

But he wasn't supposed to lose his cool. He was Lune's best hope of getting out of here.

"Pick. It. Up." The other student spit out each word.

Trever picked it up. He put the cap on his head.

"Uniform delinquency and insubordination." The recruit's lip curled. He moved closer. "Bad luck on your first day. You're dead." And suddenly there was a blaster barrel pointed at Trever's chest.

The guy wasn't just a bully, he was a lunatic! Trever's knees almost buckled. After all this, after all he'd been through, this couldn't happen. Not here.

He felt an unpleasant sting.

"Ten degrades," the student said, and strode away.

What just happened? Trever wondered. What was a degrade? Sweat trickled down his back. He thought he'd stared death in the face.

Shaken, he made his way to his quarters. He had his own small room, just enough for a sleep couch and a small dresser.

They isolate you first, Keets had explained. Part of the breakdown of your personality. They don't want you to have personality, kid.

Jude Watson

Shelves flipped up and down for work spaces. Trever stowed his gear and bounced on the sleep couch. Not very comfortable. The small pillow was like a rock.

He had noticed a supply closet on the way in. Trever slipped out and went down the hall, alert for other students and that fake blaster. He pushed open the supply closet door.

Ah. Stacks of blankets and pillows. He quickly snatched a few pillows and went back to his room. He tossed them on his bed. Might as well be comfortable while he was here.

“Activate message unit.” The voice was insistent and came from a control panel near the door. A red light was blinking. Trever pressed his thumb onto a sensor panel to identify himself.

“Recruit Fortin, report to Lieutenant Maggis, Guardian Advisor, for orientation interview,” the voice said.

Fortin was the name on the false ID docs Dex Jettster had gotten for him. Dex and Keets were both members of the Erased, who had obliterated their former identities in order to hide from the Empire. Dex had set up a safe house in Thugger’s Alley in the Orange District, a place buried so deep in the Coruscant underworld that even the Empire didn’t want to go there. They’d drilled him back at the safe house, calling him by the name over and over, going over his story until he thought he’d dive out the window.

Trever left his quarters and headed for the turbolift. He had been given the lieutenant’s office number when he arrived, and he knew it was close to the office where he’d first checked in. He’d taken a placement exam just that morning, and the results had been tabulated. He hoped he wouldn’t get thrown out on his ear. Academics had never been his strong suit.

He made his way to the office and activated the signal light that would tell Lieutenant Maggis that he was waiting.

Trever pulled at the collar of his tunic. He wasn’t used to wearing such tight clothing. He’d be blowing this joint as soon as he could figure out a way to smuggle out Lune.

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It hadn't been hard to enroll him. Not with the devious experts around him. For the first time in his life, he had a spotless academic record. Keets Freely had added the extra touch of fabricating some articles he'd supposedly written for his school paper, all about how the galaxy was a place of justice and order since the Empire took over. Pure swill, of course, but when you looked up his fake ID through the usual channels, that's what you found.

He hoped it all would hold up under Imperial scrutiny. He wasn't the smartest life-form in the quad. If he flunked the placement test, he'd be kicked out on his first day.

The door hissed open.

"Come in, already!" an impatient voice barked.

Trever had been expecting a standard Imperial officer. They all seemed to be in the mold of the Emperor—or, at least, the way Palpatine used to look before he turned into a horror holo. Tall, gray, pale. Bloodless.

But this officer was short, with a barrel chest and a big thatch of black unruly hair. His chubby cheeks gave him a boyish look, but his scowl was adult-nasty. His officer's cap was sitting askew on a glowlamp, as if he'd tossed it across the room when he'd taken it off.

Maggis had his head close to the datascreen. "Fortin. Abysmal on academics...mathematics, atrocious. Science, miserable. Historical comprehension, beneath my contempt." Maggis looked up at him with pure disgust. "In short, you are the sorriest recruit I've seen yet. How did you get accepted?"

Trever tried to look smarter. "I guess I was nervous when I took the placement test."

"But. You tested high on reflexes and piloting. We're looking for pilots. So welcome to the Imperial Navy. If you don't flunk out."

"Thank you."

"Thank you, *sir*."

"You're welcome."

Jude Watson

"I'm not thanking you, you idiot. Always use 'sir' when speaking to a superior officer. That would be me."

"Yes, sir."

Maggis looked at the datascreen again. "The other encouraging news is that in barely an hour here, you've managed to rack up ten degradates. Fortin, you are aware, aren't you, that fifty gets you kicked out?"

"They didn't tell me that, sir. They didn't even tell me what a degrade *was*."

"We don't tell you everything. You're expected to find things out for yourself." Maggis leaned back and smiled. "And if you're thinking that getting kicked out isn't such a bad thing, let me explain. You don't get to leave. You get to go to the Mining Corps and serve out your time there. So if I were you, I'd follow the rules."

"But what if I break a rule while I'm trying to find out what the rules are?"

Maggis's smile grew broader. "I guess you're out of luck."

Trever swallowed. He hadn't signed up for this crazy talk. Not at all.

"We do recognize, however, that you might need some help from time to time. We assign you an older recruit who will serve as your mentor while you're here. I see you've already met him."

Trever had a sinking feeling.

"Recruit Kestrel. Apparently you had a problem with your cap. Well. I'm sure he'll be helpful to you despite the fact that he shot you this morning. And then one day, if you're very, very good, you'll get to have a fake blaster and scare new recruits yourself." Maggis clicked a few keys. "You're due in advanced piloting in two minutes. Lateness gets you docked another degrade."

"Can you direct me to the class, sir? I wasn't given a printout of the building."

"Do I look like a traffic control droid?"

Great. Just great. Trever turned to go.

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“And Fortin?”

“Sir?”

“You’ve got another five degrades on your record. I’d put back those pillows, if I were you.”

Chapter Two

Ferus Olin was having trouble with his concentration. He was losing track of things, forgetting what he was supposed to be doing while he was doing it. His surroundings no longer seemed vivid. Voices seemed to come at him from far away. Sometimes someone would speak for minutes at a time, and though he thought he'd been listening, he would have no idea what had been said.

It was not a good situation for a double agent.

Was this what grief was like? This wasn't sadness like he'd felt before, when a friend or someone he'd known well had died. It wasn't how he'd felt when he'd learned the fate of all the Jedi. That had been a blow he'd felt keenly, as though he'd been split open.

This was worse.

He'd stood by and watched, too slow to react, as Darth Vader had casually flipped his lightsaber and ran it through his best friend, his partner, Roan Lands. He had watched Roan die. Had held onto him, locked eyes with him, and said a private good-bye.

He didn't think he had ever hated anyone this much before. It wasn't part of what he was. Being trained by Jedi bred detachment into his bones. But as he had learned to love in a

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personal, particular way, so had he learned to hate. Learned in one instant when Vader struck.

It was amazing that he was still alive. He had attacked Vader, and Vader had handled him with ease, left him hanging in the air helplessly, even laughed at him. He had been thrown in a cell and was waiting to die when the Emperor had visited him. Ferus didn't know why the Emperor had offered him a way out. Maybe he wanted to play with Vader, irritate him by pardoning Ferus. Maybe he had bigger plans. Ferus didn't care. He'd been allowed to walk out of a prison cell. Right now that was enough. He'd deal with the rest later.

Emperor Palpatine had offered him training in the dark side of the Force, and he had accepted. Because he knew there was only one way to eliminate his pain. One way to get his revenge. Take what the Emperor offered, learn how his power worked, and then use it against Vader.

If he'd still been a Jedi, if he'd been able to talk to Mace Windu or Yoda or Obi-Wan Kenobi about the offer of a Sith Lord, they all would have said the same thing: *Do not listen. Walk away. He will corrupt you.*

But that was the old way. That was the way of the Jedi who were gone now. All powerless. Because they didn't believe the Sith had anything to teach them.

What if that wasn't true? What if a Jedi could learn from a Sith, gain power and multiply his gifts, but remain a Jedi?

When he'd been alone in that cell, his cheek against the floor, Ferus had not wanted to live. The only thing that had raised him up from the floor was Palpatine's offer. The only thing that gave him life was the possibility of revenge.

The Emperor had also offered him a job he couldn't refuse. He was now in charge of the effort to find Force-sensitive beings or Jedi who had escaped Order 66. The Emperor had dismissed ex-Senator Sauro from the task, saying it took one Force-sensitive to find another. Ferus would soon have access to the list.

Jude Watson

He had already created a secret base on a constantly traveling asteroid that was surrounded by a dense atmospheric storm. His friends Raina and Toma were building shelters, setting up defense and comm systems. So far he'd only brought them Garen Muln, but soon—as soon as he was sure he'd helped all the Jedi he could—he would retire there with the ones who wanted to come. They would wait there until it was time to strike back at the Sith.

So he had a place to bring them. If he could find them. So far he hadn't had the best of luck.

He hadn't been able to discover more than hints here and there. Hints of a large-scale operation with no name. And a snare operation called *Twilight* that he suspected was targeting...a planet? An organization? Something big. He had to keep going, had to find out what the Emperor was planning, if he could.

He walked through the hallway of the Imperial garrison on Bellassa. Thanks to the Emperor's promise, he no longer had to travel with stormtrooper escorts. Darth Vader had been reassigned to a different garrison, one the Empire was building in the mountain area that had been giving them so much trouble. There was no danger of running into him here. Ferus didn't want to run into him.

Not until he was ready.

Ferus accessed the door panel to the training room. It was empty, as it often was at this hour. He had just had a holographic meeting with the Emperor that morning. He had been given his first lesson.

It's easier than you think, Palpatine had said. Oh, later there will be techniques to study, exercises to complete. But to start, you must do what you were taught never to do as a Jedi. Feel your anger, but do not let it go. Feed it. Anger wants to grow. As Jedi, you fought anger's nature. It is why you lost. So this is your first lesson, Ferus. Give in to your anger. Don't let it go.

Palpatine had smiled. *No lightsaber necessary.*

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Ferus walked to the middle of the room, his boots striking the hard permacrete. In order to do this, he would have to revive his worst memory. The one he tried to bury.

In his mind, the image flicked on.

The lightsaber. The point of impact. Roan's face when the lightsaber made contact.

The jolt of the impact, the way Roan's arms went out, the way his body folded in half.

Darth Vader standing, not looking at Roan, not caring. Looking at Ferus. Killing Roan just to get at him. Eliminating a person with blood and bone and memory and laughter and vision and love, just...to rile a rival. As a game. As a sport.

The anger was a roar inside him. He didn't turn away. He felt it move and he brought back the same image again, brought it back so that it was imprinted on the back of his eyeballs, until he screamed out loud with his pain.

Something ripped from the wall and rocketed across the space. A brace that held up an exercise bar. Ferus opened his eyes and concentrated his gaze on that bar, heavy durasteel two meters thick. It, too, ripped from the wall and flew across the space. It smashed into the wall, and a sizeable chunk of it fell away. He felt a flood of satisfaction move through him.

He turned. A chair resting against a wall shot forward. Another. He held the objects in the air. Then he focused his anger like a laser and felt it build and build until the objects smashed together and fell, broken, to the floor.

He wasn't finished yet. Not with his anger, not with this room. This room, these objects, could be smashed and broken, and if anyone cared and came after him, they would be smashed, too, because his anger was that huge.

The floor under his feet began to crack. A chunk of ceiling fell and wires spilled out, and still Ferus kept turning, his eyes burning and the anger now a rolling ball of flame inside him until he couldn't see anything but red. Red was the color of destruction.

Jude Watson

“What’s going on here?”

The Imperial officer stood in the doorway, his eyes wide.

Ferus came back to himself. He looked around. The room was destroyed.

He had never been able to do such a thing before. He was panting. The dark side of the Force had entered him, and the pleasure he’d felt was frightening. Frightening...and satisfying.

Giving the officer a look of contempt, he walked out the door. The officer scurried backward in fear. Ferus enjoyed his fear.

It was the first time since Roan’s death he did not feel pain.

Chapter Three

Flame paced back and forth in the front room of the safe house. Time was running out on this mission. She had the resistance leaders of significant Core and Mid-Rim planet systems in her movement. The Outer Rim was too unsettled, too insignificant to worry about yet. What she really needed was for Bellassa to join Moonstrike. Even if the resistance here had become fractured, it could rise again in a heartbeat. And the symbolic weight of the Bellassan Eleven was huge. That would keep the others close.

Bellassa first. Then Coruscant. Moonstrike would be complete. Her job would be done. She would have linked the resistance movements of the most important planetary systems in the galaxy. No one thought it could be done, and she had done it.

She had come a long way from Acherin. She had thought only a few years ago that the Clone Wars wouldn't touch her. She'd thought that her comfortable life would last. She hadn't been able to imagine her world destroyed, her wealth in danger, her family dead. She had to remake herself. She had to become a warrior. She had to use all her cunning, all her will, to do it. She had succeeded. Now the one important thing in her life, the only important thing, was her mission.

If these people here didn't mess up the whole thing.

Jude Watson

The sticking point was Bellassa. Since the death of Roan Lands and the arrest of Amie Antin, Wil had grown silent. Trever had smuggled out information that the Empire was building a toxic weapons delivery system on Ussa, and the info had been sent out to the city. It had been highlighted on the underground holo-print news, and the news had spread from citizen to citizen. Ussans had been outraged and there had been sporadic protests. Two days ago they had all stayed in their homes, refusing to work, and the city had shut down. The streets and air lanes had been eerily empty.

It had been a lesson for Flame. It was amazing what resistance could do.

The Imperial governor had retaliated by rounding up the children of the Bluestone Lake district and bringing them into the garrison jail. He threatened to send them off-planet to an Imperial prison, then move on to the next district, and the next, until the citizens went to work again.

Every Ussan had gone back to work the next day.

The children had been released, but now every Ussan knew to what lengths the Empire would go. The Empire had set up more checkpoints on the streets. If an Ussan was caught without ID docs, he or she was immediately taken to the garrison prison.

Flame paused in her pacing, hearing the murmur of voices. She couldn't make out the words. Something was brewing, but she didn't know what, because Wil wasn't talking. Dona had arrived, and they had been in that room for over an hour now.

When would the Eleven let her into their confidence? They had allowed her to stay in the safe house, but discussions were held behind thick security doors, with her on the other side. This was the main problem in making Moonstrike work—trust. Of course, she understood that the members of any resistance group would be wary. They had to be. She had overcome that distrust before by funding the movements or taking the same risks, becoming involved in their covert operations. Group after group had come to trust her. But the Eleven was harder to crack.

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Flame saw the alarm light go on, which meant someone was approaching the safe house. She went to the one-way window and looked out. She knew that Wil would be doing the same in the other room. It was Ferus Olin, walking down the ramp toward the front entrance.

Flame studied him for a moment. Unlike Wil, who was paler than ever since Amie had been captured, Ferus didn't show his grief on the outside. He looked the same. Yet she'd heard from Dona how destroyed he'd been by Roan's death.

She wasn't sure. Ferus was supposed to be a double agent, working for the Empire but keeping his ties to the resistance. Yet he appeared to be in the Emperor's good graces. She didn't know why the resistance leaders trusted him the way they did. No one was incorruptible.

Wil emerged from the inner room to open the door for Ferus. He walked in and nodded at Flame before placing a hand on Wil's shoulder. The two men looked at each other for a moment.

"I have news of Amie," Ferus said.

Wil went gray.

Ferus squeezed his shoulder. "No, she's alive. She's being transferred."

Wil swayed for a moment, relief on his drawn features. "Come inside. We'll talk. Dona is here."

"No," Flame said. "Wait."

They turned, impatient to be gone. But she wouldn't let this moment pass. It had to be now.

"I'm wasting my time here," she said. "I need Bellassa for Moonstrike. But if you don't trust me, I can't stay. There are other planets, other systems I need to contact."

She saw the hesitancy on Ferus and Wil's faces. She wasn't sure if she should push it. She had to be careful. She didn't want to lose Bellassa. She wasn't willing to lose it. But they had to think she was.

"I can help you. You know I can. You know that without me your resistance will wither and die. Now is the moment to make

Jude Watson

your decision. Because if not, I'm gone. I don't have any more time to give you."

She watched their faces carefully. She saw doubt on Wil's, but Ferus was better at concealing his feelings. It was Ferus who had the most to lose, she knew. She could turn him in to the Empire at any time. Ferus was the one she had to win over. They didn't trust each other, but they had to find common ground, or Moonstrike would fall apart.

"Don't go," he said. "Let Wil and me talk for a moment. Then we'll call you in."

She knew then that they would accept her. They just didn't know it yet.

She inclined her head. Relief flooded her, but she didn't let them see it.

As soon as the door hissed shut behind them, Wil turned to Ferus. "How is Amie?" he asked.

"She hasn't been tortured," Ferus said. "But I've learned they're transferring her off-planet to a prison world."

Dona rose from her seat by the window. Her broad, lined face was full of worry. "We can't let that happen."

"No," Ferus agreed, "we can't. She won't survive there."

"What about Flame?" Wil asked. "Should we involve her?"

"She's right. She's wasting her time if we don't let her inside the Eleven. And what she's offering can help us. Especially now."

"What do you mean?"

"If we're to have any effective resistance on Bellassa, we have to make sure the children are safe."

"Evacuation?" Dona asked.

"Possibly. It might come to that. We couldn't pull off that sort of massive operation without help."

"Do you think we should include her, then?"

"I think we should give her a test. We'll involve her in the operation to rescue Amie, but she won't know the details. That

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way, Amie will be safe, but we'll have the benefit of Flame's expertise. She's an incredible pilot."

"Tell us your plan," Wil said.

"I don't have a plan, exactly. Just some ideas. I've got the transfer point and the time—we have two days."

Wil frowned. "That's not much time to plan. I don't want to endanger Amie. Maybe we should attack from the air."

"They'll be expecting that. They won't be expecting a rescue effort here. The crackdown has shut down the city. They won't imagine we'll be able to pull it off."

Dona placed her broad hands on her knees. "Then we do it here."

"How?" Wil asked. "Where is the transfer point?"

"They're using the Imperial landing platform outside the hangar on the outskirts of the city. That hangar is restricted to high-priority traffic. We'll have to rescue her, then take her through Ussa to here. I don't think we can risk taking her off-planet."

"Take her all the way through the city? That's insane," Wil said. "Do you know how many checkpoints we'd have to get through?"

"I know exactly how many. We can use some of the safe passages the Eleven have worked on."

"But they aren't complete!"

"There's a tunnel under the lake."

"It's not complete, either."

"Well, we'll have to work on it, then," Ferus said. "It's going to have to be ready in two days. In the meantime, we get the strike force together."

Wil nodded, thinking hard. "It will take time. My best operatives are in the mountains now."

"Don't worry," Ferus said. "I have a strike force on the way."

Chapter Four

Ry-Gaul, Solace, and Clive shot through the holographic portal in the tanglewoods of Bellassa. Ferus had contacted them, and they'd taken off from Coruscant within the hour.

Solace glanced at Ry-Gaul. She was no chatterbox, but Ry-Gaul was the most silent being she'd ever met. Since they'd found him on Coruscant, on the run from the Empire, he'd told his story briefly and then rarely ventured an opinion or observation. Solace didn't mind the quiet, but she knew it was driving Clive crazy. If she had a sense of humor, she'd find it funny. Luckily she didn't have the time or temperament to be amused.

"Hey, mates," Clive said. "We had to dodge ten Imperial patrols and a buzz droid or two, but looks like we made it. I say *when*. Glad to be here. Don't all speak at once."

Solace kept her eyes on the console. "Look for that landing site. I have the general coordinates, but they move the site for safety. We need a visual."

"There." Ry-Gaul's voice was low.

"He speaks," Clive muttered.

Solace saw it ahead. A scrim of bush and knotted tree trunks, but a clear space for a small craft to land. She eased the ship inside.

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They scrambled out of the cockpit hatch. Someone stepped out of the tangle of underbrush and held up a hand. It was Ferus.

Their meetings were infrequent now that he was a double agent. Solace felt a rush of gladness at seeing him. Could it be she was actually starting to grow fond of him?

He walked toward them, and the pleasure she felt was suddenly invaded by unease. Something was wrong.

He nodded to Ry-Gaul. "I was overwhelmed when Solace told me you were alive. Every Jedi we find is a gift. To find someone I knew...someone I had mourned..." Ferus faltered. His eyes were wet.

"I remember you well," Ry-Gaul said. "I do not remember you this emotional."

"I've changed."

"We have all changed." It was the most Ry-Gaul had spoken in more than a day.

"Ferus, we're all sorry about Roan," Solace said. "He is one with the Force now."

"He was one of the best," Clive said. "The galaxy is diminished."

Ferus didn't acknowledge their comments. Again, the unease sent its tendrils snaking around Solace's insides. The Ferus she knew would have said something, would have agreed or shared how he was feeling.

"We can't risk a long communication, so Solace wasn't able to give me details," Ferus said, changing the subject abruptly back to Ry-Gaul. "How did you escape Order 66?"

"I was on a mission that only Yoda and Mace knew about," Ry-Gaul said. "I was undercover, not traveling as a Jedi. Some scientists took me in—a man and his wife. They disappeared, and I've been looking for them. Tobin Gantor and Linna Naltree."

"But Linna Naltree is here," Ferus said. "She's working for the Empire. Under duress, I think. She was the one who helped Trever escape the garrison when Amie was captured and..." Ferus stopped. He swallowed.

Jude Watson

He can't even speak Roan's name, Solace realized.

"Can we get her out?" Ry-Gaul asked.

"I don't know," Ferus said. "I don't know what pressure Vader is putting on her. I can try to talk to her."

Ry-Gaul exhaled. "I'm glad she's here and not in some prison. That was what I feared. As I searched, I found other scientists who had disappeared."

Ferus nodded. "They've been recruited by the Empire for a big project. I just don't know what it is. Only the Emperor, Vader, and maybe Moff Tarkin know the extent of it. They're doing research, building something big. Maybe they're creating a whole prefabricated city and will plunk it down somewhere. Sounds crazy, but the plans are on that scale."

"So what's the plan to rescue Amie?" Solace asked. She pushed away her uneasiness. What was it, anyway? Something in his eyes? Some disturbance in the Force? Something about the way he wasn't really looking at her?

"We'll go over it after I get you into the city," Ferus said. "The Eleven sent a team to complete a tunnel under the lake near the landing platform. You'll have surprise on your side." Ferus hesitated. "I can't tell you how much I wish I could go on this mission with you."

"Nonsense," Solace said briskly. "We have you deep in Imperial territory. We can't pull you out for this."

"I'm scheduled to meet with Hydra, the Head Inquisitor, on Coruscant," Ferus said. "I'll have access to the list of possible Jedi. This means we could find others. In any case, I'll be far away when the plan is executed."

"Darth Vader will try to blame you anyway," Clive said. "He's nasty that way." Clive's dark eyes suddenly had a hint of sorrow in them. "But you are well acquainted with his ruthlessness," he said quietly.

It was the second acknowledgment Clive had made of Ferus's pain, and Solace expected Ferus to turn to Clive, to let him know in word or gesture that he had heard it. But he didn't.

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Instead, she felt the tremor in the Force that was surrounding Ferus. Vader's name had done it.

"We can use my transport to enter the city," Ferus said. "This vehicle has automatic clearance through the checkpoints."

"Too bad we can't use this baby on our getaway," Clive said, eyeing the airspeeder.

"All automatic clearances are canceled when an attack occurs," Ferus reported. "You wouldn't get far. We've got the checkpoints covered another way."

"Have you seen Vader since you were released from the holding cell?" Solace asked. She wasn't interested in the answer so much as Ferus's reaction to the name.

Ferus's face tightened. "He left the garrison for the mountains," he said.

Solace felt it again. The dark side of the Force was touching Ferus like a shadow. She wanted to tell him to beware, but this wasn't the time or place.

"I have to return to the garrison now," he said. "I'll drop you near the safe house. I don't want to bring an Imperial vehicle too close to it."

He was lying. She knew it. She didn't know why. Perhaps it was a harmless untruth, but Ferus had never told her a lie before.

They climbed into the transport. Ferus took off, piloting the craft expertly through the crowded space lanes and zooming past the checkpoints. He dropped Solace, Clive, and Ry-Gaul at a deserted corner.

"May the Force be with you, Ferus," Solace said. She put layers of meaning into her words.

"I'll see you on Coruscant," he answered, turning away from her concern.

Then he headed off.

"I'll scout around," Clive said. "Make sure we weren't followed before we head to the safe house."

As soon as Clive left, Ry-Gaul spoke. "Are you sure of Ferus?" he asked.

Jude Watson

"Yesterday I would have said yes," Solace said. "But I feel it, too. Something has happened to him since Roan died. The Emperor released him from that cell. Even after he attacked Vader."

Ry-Gaul's eyes were silver in the dying light. "I felt the dark side of the Force. Just a vibration, nothing more."

"We have all been tempted by anger," Solace said. "He has lost his partner. Someone who was closer than anyone else to him."

"So he is struggling now with grief," Ry-Gaul said. "The danger, of course, is if his grief turns to anger."

"His better nature will win," Solace said. "The Force is strong in Ferus. He will remember the Jedi way."

Ry-Gaul looked around as the shadows lengthened around them. "It is a new galaxy," he said.

It was a remark Solace was beginning to understand was typical of Ry-Gaul. It seemed merely an observation. Yet it said so much more.

In this new galaxy controlled by the Empire, shadows were deeper. There were caverns to fall into, very deep holes, treacherous places where even the best of beings could become lost. People could turn. No wonder when they saw each other they spoke so much of being changed. They had changed, and kept on changing; they were hard and getting harder. Their rage and sorrow could tip them into a place the dark side of the Force could reach.

Not Ferus, Solace said to herself. *It will never happen to Ferus.*

Chapter Five

Ferus had felt Solace's worry. He should have been better at concealment. He would have to learn that. He imagined that Palpatine was a master at it. He'd fooled an entire Senate, after all. Not to mention the Jedi Council.

The memory of what he had done at the garrison still weighed heavily on him. He'd been afraid Solace would pick up on it—and she had.

He had lied to her, too. He wasn't going back to the garrison. He couldn't bear to tell them where he was going, because he couldn't bear to say Roan's name in front of them. That was when the anger rose up and choked him.

There was one more thing he had to do before he left Bellassa. He had to pay a visit to Roan's family.

Once they had been his family, too. Ferus had arrived on Bellassa friendless and alone. He had lived all his life in the Jedi Temple. There had been plenty of contemplation and solitude there, but you were always surrounded by the humming life and energy of the place. You felt connected. When he'd come to Ussa he'd felt as though gravity was no longer working for him, that he was simply floating through space and time, not connecting to anyone or anything. Then Roan had befriended him and grounded him. He'd brought him home.

Jude Watson

Ferus was careful to leave the Imperial speeder at a checkpoint and take a long walk to Roan's parents. They were living in a different home now, under another name. It had become too dangerous for them to live openly as Roan's family. Roan had restricted his visits in the last year. Ferus hadn't seen them at all.

He stood in front of the door, knowing that the sensor was checking him out for weapons. His lightsaber would be picked up and an alert would go off inside. But they would recognize him and let him in.

The door opened. Roan's mother, Enna, put out her hand. Tears glittered in her eyes. "Ferus. You came."

He stepped into her embrace. "I had to."

She drew him inside. She put a hand on his cheek. "Thank you."

He followed her into the main room. Roan's father, Alexir, stood and hugged him. "Thank you for coming." His voice was hoarse.

Feelings surged through Ferus, making him disoriented. He felt like a clumsy protocol droid with a bad servomotor, stumbling about the room greeting Roan's close friends and family who had gathered in the Bellassan tradition of Nine Days of Mourning. No one would leave Alexir and Enna's house until the nine days were up, and then the group would rotate visits for nine weeks. Ferus knew the tradition well. He had participated in it himself three years before when Roan's beloved Aunt Lilia had died.

Ferus sat next to Enna. This was tradition, too. The latest to arrive always took a seat next to the mother.

"Now the family is complete," Enna said.

Alexir turned to Ferus. "Tell us," he said. "We know only that he died in the garrison."

This was what he had come for, but Ferus couldn't find the words.

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Enna looked him in the eyes, reassuring him with her gaze. “You must tell us everything.”

He knew they would blame him. But he owed them the truth. It was why he had come. It was why he’d been afraid to come.

“Roan volunteered for the mission. A team went into the garrison to break into the computers to discover what the Imperials are really doing in the factories. We were discovered. Darth Vader appeared. I arrived—Darth Vader would assume I was on his side. You know...I am working for the Empire now. At least, it appears that way.”

“Roan told us everything on his last visit,” Enna said, touching his arm. “We never believed you were truly working for them.”

Ferus cleared his throat. He didn’t feel worthy of the trust and affection in this room. It should be Roan who was here. He was a poor substitute for their son, and yet they were so kind they would die before they let him feel it.

“I was talking to him, trying to persuade him to release Roan and Amie into my care. I was in the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a *word*. There was no warning. One moment Vader was standing there, the next moment his lightsaber...” Ferus stopped as he felt Enna flinch.

“Roan was struck down,” Ferus continued, forcing the words through his constricted throat. “I knelt with him. His last message to me was to stay silent, not to avenge him. His last thought was not for himself.”

He felt Enna’s deep shudder.

“I should have known Vader would strike,” Ferus said.

“You couldn’t know,” Alexir assured him.

“We’re glad you were with him,” Enna said. “He would have wanted you to be with him. That will give me comfort always.”

They didn’t blame him. They included him in their sorrow. Ferus felt he might break down. He got up quickly and left the room.

Jude Watson

He blundered into the kitchen. Covered dishes lined the counters. The larder was full...food brought to grieving relatives. It was a custom throughout the galaxy. *What purpose did it serve?* he wondered. It was a ritual for the givers, he imagined, not those who sat with their grief hour after hour. Nothing would help them.

He had brought nothing except the details of death to this house.

He would walk away from all this sorrow and know he was responsible for it. Of course they had told him he couldn't have anticipated Vader's move. They didn't understand the Jedi. They didn't know that any Jedi worth his or her training would have anticipated it.

Ferus slammed his fist down on the counter.

"Don't break Enna's dishes," a voice said behind him. "You know how she feels about them."

He turned. It took him a minute to recognize who had spoken. "Malory?"

"It's me." She gave a small smile. "A little changed from when you last saw me."

It had been at her mother's Nine Days of Mourning. Malory was Lilia's daughter, Roan's first cousin. He remembered her as a young girl, slender and pale, with long silky hair the color of moonlight. Now her hair was cropped short and she looked more mature, meeting his glance with a direct friendly gaze that reminded him suddenly of Roan. A fresh pain sliced through him.

"I'm so sorry about Roan," she said. "I don't have any words for you. There are none."

The simple words touched him, and he wanted to turn away to hide it, but he didn't. "I know."

Malory moved to the counter and began to make tea. Ferus sat, admiring her sensitivity. She was giving him a moment to recover.

"What have you been doing these past few years?" he asked.

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“I was a med student on Coruscant,” she said. “Got through all my training during the Clone Wars. I trained at ChanPal.”

Ferus nodded. ChanPal was the hospital facility in Galactic City that was renowned as one of the best in the galaxy.

“Then the Emperor took over the facility.” Malory made a face as she reached for a tray. “At first it wasn’t so bad, but now...” She shrugged. “It’s called EmPal SuRecon now—Emperor’s Surgical Reconstruction Center. We started turning away non-human patients. The best doctors and personnel started to quit, and they recruited others. When I finished my training they offered me a job, but I said no. I won’t work for the Empire. So I left and came back home. I’m needed here more, anyway.”

She placed the teapot and mugs on the tray. Ferus had been half-listening to her, but something pinged among the clutter of words. He reached for it.

He heard Palpatine’s voice in his head. *I created him.*

Vader’s body armor, his breath-mask, his helmet. Could it be that Vader received his state-of-the-art prosthetics at the Emperor’s pet project?

Malory hoisted the tray.

“Wait,” Ferus said.

“Would you like some tea?” Malory asked politely.

“No,” Ferus said. “But I would like your help.”

“Name it. You’re family.”

“I need you to take that job at EmPal.”

Carefully, Malory put down the tray. “Ferus, ask me anything, but don’t ask me to do that.”

“It’s about avenging Roan’s death,” Ferus said.

Her gaze was steady on him, reading him. She took a breath. “Then I’m in.”

Chapter Six

Jenna Zan Arbor was making Darth Vader wait. No doubt it was a ploy of some kind. She didn't know how irritable he was when beings thought they could manipulate him. She'd learn.

He had come down to the hangar as a mark of respect he didn't have but wanted to demonstrate. The ship had landed, but she had not emerged. He would think that she would be more mindful of the respect owed to him. Not to mention the fact that she was hoping to land a contract with the Empire.

What she didn't know was that he needed her more than she needed him. Which was why he was still standing here.

He was a second away from leaving when Jenna Zan Arbor appeared at the top of the ramp, dressed in a metallic leathris cloak with black feathers, her still-blond hair piled high in a ridiculous coiffure. She paused, for effect. Was he supposed to admire her? He supposed she had been beautiful in her day, but that was long ago. Surgeries and treatments had kept her skin smooth and tight, but she was a human woman, after all. The life she had lived may not have showed in wrinkles or sags, but somehow the corruption inside her was evident.

And what will you look like, twenty years on?

The jolt of the voice rose in his mind. He felt heat rise inside his body armor. That voice—he must banish it. Forever. It was

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the voice of Padmé. It was the voice he heard in the middle of the night, awake and sleeping. It was what pushed him from his uneasy rest and led him to stalk the confines of the garrison, checking up on those who were working through the night, becoming the bane of the night shift.

It was why Ferus Olin had grown from a petty nuisance to a problem. It wasn't Ferus so much—he was insignificant—but the memories that leaked in when he was around. Looking at Ferus reminded Darth Vader of Anakin Skywalker. Before Ferus he had been able to think of Anakin as another person entirely.

He had derived so much satisfaction from killing Roan Lands. He hadn't planned it, but the opportunity had presented itself, and it had been the perfect solution. He had taken from Ferus what had been taken from him. He had vanquished his enemy and brought him down.

It had been so easy. He had felt so satisfied.

His nights, however, had not been easy.

Then the Emperor had stepped in. It had been a surprise, to say the least, that his Master had arranged for Ferus's release. Had even given him a new assignment. Vader still didn't know why. It could be simply a test for him, Ferus a puppet in his Master's hands. But Ferus's release had enraged him, and that had helped him restore his balance. His fever of anger was back to ice. He was in control now.

Except for the nights.

The thing to do was focus on the moment. He watched Zan Arbor descend the ramp. She had the same brittle vitality she'd had when he'd known her before. He'd met her when he'd been a Jedi apprentice. She'd been a galactic criminal then. He'd tracked her through the galaxy, had caught her. But she wouldn't recognize him now.

He didn't want to think of Obi-Wan Kenobi. He didn't want to think of Anakin Skywalker. He could not function if this woman reminded him of the past. No matter how much he needed her, he would send her away if that were the case.

Jude Watson

With an effort of will, he chased away the ghosts of his past.

“Lord Vader.” She stopped and bowed. “I didn’t realize I had the honor of your personal reception. I would have emerged sooner.”

“Do not start our acquaintance with a lie,” Vader said.

For a moment, she was taken aback. Then she smiled. “All right. I made you wait to establish power. It’s something I’m in the habit of doing. From now on, let us agree to be honest throughout our dealings. It is more efficient.”

“Precisely.” He knew she would lie anyway, but they might as well have the fiction that they trusted each other.

They walked into his private office, which was constantly monitored for bugging devices. No one could ever find out what he was about to do.

She settled herself in a chair, arranging her cloak in folds around her. “Now,” she said, “I know the Empire is interested in weapon delivery systems on a massive scale. It’s not my area of expertise, but—”

“That’s not why you’re here.”

“Ah. Then what is the reason?”

“Rumors have reached me about a new drug you are working on,” Vader said. “You are close to perfecting an agent that can target specific areas of the brain.”

“Yes. A memory agent. It can scan for memory and erase specific areas. It is related to time. In other words, I should be able to blot out a week, or a month, or even years, if need be. I’ve discovered that there are timelines in the brain, timelines that can be mapped....It is very technical.”

“Have you tested the drug on humans?”

She shifted her position in the chair. “Only a few. It is difficult...to get human subjects. That’s why I placed the request to the Emperor for access to prisoners.”

“I can obtain for you human subjects,” Vader said curtly. “That is not a problem. As well as funding, and technical help.”

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"The human subjects...yes, I need them, but not just anyone," Zan Arbor said. "To be able to pinpoint timelines can be confusing if there is too much experience. In these early stages, I need to start on...more impressionable subjects. With limited experience."

"I see. I can arrange that," Vader said. "And in return..."

She waited, her blue eyes alert. She knew there would be a deal that had to be struck.

"You must, of course, sign away all rights to the procedure, ceding them to the Empire."

Zan Arbor shook her head. "I have never signed over the rights to my work. It is my integrity."

He had expected this. It was part of the negotiation.

"Nevertheless, I must insist." He let a moment pass. "Aside from the benefits of not turning down a request from the Empire..." He let his words trail off, let her mull over the implications of this. She swallowed. Vader continued. "...we can work out the necessary financial arrangements so that you will reap the benefits if the procedure is successful. We are less interested in profits than the use of your discovery."

She let that sink in. He knew her greed. As long as she was guaranteed profits, she would sign over anything.

"Assuming we can come to a financial agreement," she said, "there are some other things I would want."

He waved a gloved hand for her to continue.

"An apartment in the Republica 500 tower."

The tower that the Emperor used for his private quarters. The apartments were luxurious, difficult to get, Senators jockeying, bribing, to get one. Lifelong feuds had begun over the competition for those apartments.

"Done," Vader said.

"On a high floor!" she warned. "Also, a personal introduction to Raith Sienar, and a starship designed by him, retrofitted to my personal specifications. Paid for by the Empire."

"Agreed."

Jude Watson

“A high-level security pass so I don’t have to stop for security checks anywhere in the galaxy. It is so time-consuming.”

A right awarded only to the highest level of officials, such as himself or Moff Tarkin—soon to be Grand Moff.

“Agreed.”

She looked startled, then crafty. He knew she was surprised at how easily he had acquiesced to those things and was trying to think of more to ask for.

“So we have a deal.” He said this flatly, warning her that she shouldn’t go on.

“Pending the financial agreement, yes.”

Something inside him relaxed. If she succeeded, if he was certain her procedure was foolproof, he had a way out of his nightmares.

Padmé would be gone.

Anakin Skywalker would be gone.

They would just be names he would hear in passing. They would make no impression on him. If his Master reminded him, which sometimes he liked to do, to test him and torment him, he would hear that he had once loved someone and it would mean nothing to him.

Padmé, you will be just a name to me. Nothing more. And that is all you deserve because of your betrayal!

He wrenched his attention back to Zan Arbor. “I have arranged for you to have an assistant. Linna Naltree has trained at the best scientific institutes. She has extensive experience in neural studies. You both can work in the Imperial labs on Coruscant.”

“And the human subjects?”

“I will send them shortly.”

Chapter Seven

Volunteers from the Eleven had set up shifts and worked through two nights on the tunnel. It had been a dangerous job. Imperial patrols moved around Moonstone Lake in random patterns and times. The cold lake water required special suits, and the volunteers had to stay underwater for long periods. In the end, the volunteers couldn't guarantee the tunnel was completely watertight, but they were able to add enough meters to get close to the hangar itself.

Solace, Ry-Gaul, and Clive found the entrance cleverly hidden in the rocks, behind a holographic portal. The trio crawled inside the small opening and then continued to crawl into the tunnel.

"This is fun," Clive remarked, wrist deep in mud as he moved along. "Remind me to thank Ferus for this."

Ry-Gaul said nothing, of course. He was a tall man, and yet he seemed to move with great ease through the mud, even on his hands and knees. Solace was already twenty meters ahead.

Clive sighed. What was he doing here anyway, slogging through mud underneath a half-frozen lake? He was no Jedi. He didn't have the mind control to pretend he wasn't in pain. Freezing water dripped through the makeshift tunnel onto his head. It snaked down the neck of his tunic. He'd thought nothing could be worse than an Imperial prison.

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Okay, this might be worse, he admitted to himself.

Why was this always happening to him? He had resolved to stay neutral in the Clone Wars, and he'd wound up a double agent. Well, at least he'd done that for the credits that were shoved his way. But here he was, involved in the resistance on a planet that wasn't even his homeworld, working with two Jedi he barely knew while his pal Ferus was off hobnobbing with the Emperor's favorites!

At first he'd thought it would be a lark to help out Ferus. And, well, he'd had nothing better to do. He'd expected to be hiding out in some cushy joint and waiting out the Empire. It had to fall sooner or later. Why did he have to get involved in giving it a push? He had actually *volunteered* for this.

He would have to revisit his stand on loyalty. That was it. He owed Ferus a favor, and fell in with Ferus's mates, and they had taken him in, so he'd figured he owed them. And he did. But how much? Did that include getting on his hands and knees in mud and crawling toward heavily armed stormtroopers?

With every gain in forward movement, the water rose. Soon they were slogging through a half-meter of cold lake...and it was still rising. The plastoid above his head was starting to crack.

The lake was so large it had tides. Had anyone investigated that? What if the tide came in?

With such thoughts for company, Clive was surprised when Solace stopped moving and held up a hand to stop. The ceiling of the tunnel was now only centimeters over his head. He was almost flat. If he laid down, he'd be underwater.

She signaled to them that they had reached the end of the tunnel. That meant they were squarely in Imperial territory.

They were right on schedule. And in his experience, the Empire's forces were usually right on the dot. He touched his utility belt to make sure his blaster was there. It was a nervous habit. He wasn't a shooting kind of guy; he preferred more unusual weaponry. Ry-Gaul and Solace had told him if all went according to plan, he wouldn't have to shoot at all.

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In his experience, all *never* went according to plan.

His teeth began to chatter from cold and nerves. Clive clamped his jaw shut. Sometimes being brave was just doing what you said you'd do.

Solace held up five fingers. The countdown. That meant that the stormtroopers had emerged with Amie and were leading her to the transport. He couldn't see a thing except the gleam of Solace's fingers and the blackness beyond.

Five

Four

Three

Two

One

Go!

He found he could move fast if he had to, but not as fast as Ry-Gaul and Solace. He scuttled forward, moving on his elbows now. Solace had disappeared into the blackness ahead. Then Ry-Gaul shot out of the opening. Clive pushed himself through.

He emerged on a rocky beach of black sand. The Jedi's eyes must have adjusted immediately, but it took him a few long moments to see through the early dawn and the streaking, icy rain. The outdoor landing platform glistened ahead. There were no lights on. He could barely make out some droid hover-loaders in inactive mode. It took him several blinks to see the figures walking quickly toward a black starship. Stormtroopers surrounded a slight figure, propelling her forward by her elbows. Sometimes her feet dragged and they yanked her up.

The stormtroopers hadn't seen Solace and Ry-Gaul yet. The Jedi were moving so quietly and so fast that Clive could barely see them himself. His job was to stay out of the battle and snatch Amie.

Through the spitting rain he saw the spinning arc of lightsabers. Ry-Gaul raised a hand and an entire line of stormtroopers shot backward as though pushed by a turbodozer.

Jude Watson

He couldn't see Solace, just the tracing of light moving through the air as bodies slammed into pavement. Now streaks of blasterfire shattered the blackness like cracks on glass. All the while he was running, lungs aching. He could hear his panting breath.

He had seen Ferus use his lightsaber, but Clive felt a fresh sense of amazement at witnessing the two Jedi in action. It was perfect movement, perfect timing. For two Jedi who rarely strung a sentence together, they knew how to communicate. Ry-Gaul and Solace made taking down two squads of stormtroopers armed with blasters and grenades look easy.

It was all so fast. He knew they couldn't wait for him, but he was falling behind. Amie was in danger.

She must have faked her weakness, because suddenly she was running from her captors, diving and rolling under the starship ramp. Clive fumbled for his blaster but then it was in his hand as he dived underneath from the opposite end and found her. Her eyes were clear and determined, but he could also see her fear.

"You're supposed to come with me," he said.

This was the hard part. Trusting the Jedi. They had told him he needed to run, to not think about the blasters at his back, that they'd protect him. He just needed to take Amie and go.

He wasn't good at trusting someone to watch his back, but Amie didn't seem to have the same problem. She nodded, and they ran, with Clive shielding her as best he could. They could hear the explosions behind them but they didn't turn. The permacrete was slick with rain but they flew over it, heading back down toward the lake's edge.

They were almost at the end of the permacrete when the security lights suddenly blazed on at full power. Clive heard the rapid fire of an E-Web repeating blaster, which was definitely something you didn't want to hear at your back.

"Jump!" he cried. They jumped down the slope to the beach, rolling into darkness. Clive got a mouthful of sand.

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He came up spitting and cursing. He helped Amie up and they raced along the beach. He knew any moment there would be searchlights sweeping the area, but they didn't have far to go. Amie was starting to gasp, and she held her side.

"Almost there," he grunted.

The Eleven had prepared one more surprise—another portal, this one hidden in the rocky hillside that rose to the cliff overlooking the lake. He saw Dona rise from the wet rocks like a seal. She beckoned to them.

They made it inside the portal as the searchlights blazed and swept the shoreline. They burrowed into the trail in the rocks, moving fast. The passage was cleverly concealed, with rocks and seaweed layered over it so it would be invisible from the air. At times they had to crawl, but they were able to make it up the cliff without being spotted.

They got to the top and came out at a small parking area for airspeeders. This overlook had once been a popular spot but had fallen into disrepair with the coming of the Empire's battalion.

Dona's gray hair was plaited down her back. She was dressed as an Ussan priest, the ones who brought bodies to burial and drove white carts pulled by native beasts called dhunas.

Amie let out a choked laugh. "This is my escape? Being dead?"

"You arguing? Go!"

Amie slipped into the white cart festooned with flowers. Dona quickly clapped down the board that covered the open back. She began to drive the dhuna forward with crooning noises that were like singing, the chants the priests made as they walked through the streets. She headed up the beach trail to the paved lane.

Clive ran along the permacrete, his lungs on fire. He had to loop around and come up through a wooded area into a main thoroughfare of the Moonstone District. He'd walked the route yesterday. If everything went according to plan, he'd find a member of the Eleven waiting for him.

Jude Watson

They had all pitched in. Amie would be transferred from hand to hand, from cart to speeder to gravsled. The Jedi would follow. As Amie approached the safe house, the helpers would drop away until only the original team was left.

There were multiple checkpoints to pass through. Diversions to stage. It wasn't over yet. Even now the alarms were no doubt ringing in the Imperial garrisons all over the city.

Amie was free, but she wasn't safe. They still had a long way to go.

Chapter Eight

Trever found his way slowly to his piloting class. It turned out there were maps in central kiosks throughout the complex—only nobody had told him. Each map gave him small portions of the layout, so he was never quite sure if he was going in the right direction.

They didn't care about maps, but they managed to hang huge lasersigns reading SAFETY SECURITY JUSTICE PEACE on every major hallway. And holoprojections of the Emperor in better days, before his hideous scarring.

He hated this school. It was designed to humiliate and control. Well, of course it was. It was run by the Empire in order to fashion little Imperials who would become big moffing evildoing Imperials.

He made it to class with seconds to spare. To his dismay, Kestrel was there, the student who was supposed to be his advisor, but whom he was perfectly certain would turn out to be his tormentor. Kestrel stood at the front, talking to the instructor, who turned out to be Lieutenant Maggis.

Thanks for the directions, sir.

Kestrel saw Trever and flashed a cocky grin. He threaded through the other students and came toward him.

Jude Watson

“Hey, Fortin. Fifteen degrades on your first day. Not exactly a stellar beginning.”

“I’m not worried,” Trever said.

“You should be,” Kestrel replied, putting his hand on his fake blaster. “I just might decide to give you another.”

Trever was about to blow everything and tell Kestrel what he really thought when he spotted Lune across the room. That gave him the self-control he needed. He thought of Ferus, deep in enemy territory. He began to understand now what kind of self-control Ferus must have to exercise in order to make it through a single day.

Lune was much younger than he was, so he was surprised to see that they were in the same class. But he should have guessed that the kid’s Force-ability would land him in advanced piloting.

Maggis called the class to order, distracting Kestrel. Trever moved toward Lune. The boy hadn’t seen him yet, and he didn’t want Lune to betray him by looking surprised or calling out.

Instead, Lune surprised him. Of course the kid did. He was close to spooky, the way he could tell when someone was behind him. The Jedi Master Garen Muln had worked with him on “awareness tactics” back when they were all on the asteroid. Garen was practically a ghost now, his powers diminished, but he was still a good teacher. Trever wanted to think “awareness tactics” was just Jedi mumba-humba, but it actually did seem to work.

“Tell my mother I’m okay,” Lune said without turning around, as soon as Trever was within earshot.

“Tell her yourself. I’m going to get you out of here,” Trever replied.

Lune lifted a shoulder slightly, but Trever got the meaning: *Good luck.*

“Today, you worthless lunkheads, we’re going to move on up to flight simulation,” Maggis announced. “Note the key word, *simulation*. I wouldn’t trust the lot of you to pilot me around a

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space park. Now pick a partner and decide who will be pilot and copilot without shooting each other and we'll begin."

It was lucky that Trever and Lune were standing together. As the new recruits, it was natural that they would pair up.

They made their way to one of the flight simulators and stepped inside the cockpit.

"I've got special handlers," Lune said once they were inside. "Spies that watch me. I think they report to Maggis. Kestrel is one. Him and his friend Flinn. I'm never alone."

"Not a problem," Trever said. "I've gotten out of worse places." He wasn't sure that was true, but it sounded good.

Lune took the pilot's seat and Trever swung into the copilot's. The cockpit window was a blank holographic screen. Suddenly it came alive with ships.

"You're in the middle of a battle," Maggis's voice boomed out from the system speaker. "Red against blue. Pilots fly. Copilots engage the enemy."

Trever grabbed the laser cannon controls of their ARC-170.

"Visual sightings only," Maggis said, his voice booming through the cockpit comm. "No targeting computers in this exercise."

"This should be fun," Trever said.

He aimed the cannon at a nearby vessel, honing in on it.

"Trever, we're blue!" Lune shouted. "Shoot at the *red* guys!"

"Oops!" Trever swung the cannon around and aimed at a red ship on the monitor. He squeezed the trigger. The ship exploded on-screen.

"I am one full moon amazing shot!" Trever crowed.

"Watch out, Captain Amazing, there's one coming up on our left," Lune said, diving the craft down.

The battle program was complicated and fast. In addition to competing against the other students, they had other obstacles to contend with. It was a large-scale battle, and Star Destroyers and Tri-Fighters would suddenly enter the airspace. Buzz droids would suddenly loom. Asteroids careened toward them. Trever

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had a fine time blasting away at the other starfighters, but he knew he wouldn't have lasted a minute without Lune at the helm. The boy seemed to know when a zoomy ARC-170 would dog their tail before it registered on the screen.

One by one, the other flight simulator teams were blasted out of the sky. Soon only Trever and Lune were left with Kestrel and his partner, Flinn.

"I think we should let them win," Lune muttered as put the ship into a steep climb. "We don't want to attract too much attention."

Trever took a moment to shoot a look at Lune. "Or we could just win and drive Kestrel crazy."

Lune grinned.

Kestrel was a good pilot, but Lune was better. Lune stayed above them, flying fast, as fast as the simulator would go, and never lost control. He let them chase him. The program released a field of asteroids into the frame. Lune dodged them easily. One of them clipped one of Kestrel's wings.

"That's it. He's going to have control problems. I'm going in," Lune murmured. "Get ready."

Trever hunched over the controls. "Go."

Lune was calm as he swept the ship into an arc. Then he suddenly heeled to the right and dived. "I'll tell you when to shoot."

Trever would have been annoyed, but he knew Lune's skill was greater than his own.

"Now. Starboard guns."

Trever shot the starboard laser cannons and Lune made a sharp starboard turn. It seemed simultaneous, which would make the aim go awry, but it was a split second before, and the aim was true. Kestrel was already firing at them, but the fire streaked across open space. Trever's shot went home. Kestrel's ship exploded.

Trever let out a whoop of pure joy. The class cheered and jeered, depending on their loyalties. Kestrel had his supporters,

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but most of the younger recruits had been rooting for Lune and Trever.

They climbed out of the cockpit simulator. Kestrel's neck was bright red as he climbed out at the same time. *Oops*, Trever thought. They'd humiliated him. They were fresh recruits, and they'd beaten him.

Squawk! Ruby-throated kete! Trever wanted to catcall, but he bit back the insult.

Maggis called for attention. "That was the most pathetic display I've ever seen," he said in disgust. "I've seen toddlers in a nursery throw blocks with more accuracy. All of you should be flunked out today. Divinian, you were the only one to show any skill whatsoever. Fortin, you get a failing grade."

"But I blasted Kestrel out of the sky!" Trever protested.

"I heard that yell. You showed emotion. That's against Imperial rules. Do that in a cockpit again and the next thing you know you'll be eating slop on a tray in the Mining Corps."

Kestrel smirked at him.

"Tomorrow we take a look at some real starships in the hangar, so I want you up on your manuals. Strain your puny brains. Class dismissed. In other words, get out of my sight."

The class started to move out as the clanging bells and flashing lights urged them to hurry.

Kestrel drifted behind them.

"You're going down, Fortin," he said.

"You think? Seems like you're the one who just flamed out," Lune replied.

"I wouldn't make friends with Fortin if I were you, Divinian," Flinn said, coming up close to Lune's side and leaning in. "He's not going to last long. Pretty soon he'll be a drone worker on a mining planet."

"Maybe," Trever said. "But I know one thing for sure—we just outflew you, outgunned you, and outclassed you."

Jude Watson

Kestrel opened his mouth angrily, but just then they passed under the gaze of Maggis, who stood at the doorway, arms folded. He looked at them from under his heavy black brows.

“That probably wasn’t the best move,” Trever muttered as they entered the swirl of recruits in the hallway. “It was the stupidest thing we could have done.”

“Yeah,” Lune said cheerfully. “But it sure felt good.”

Trever looked over his shoulder. Maggis was still watching them.

“I’d better take off. Don’t think we should be seen together. As soon as I come up with a plan, I’ll find you.”

“I already have a plan,” Lune said. “Meet me in the commons room an hour after lights-down tonight.”

Chapter Nine

Ferus was desperate for news, but he was traveling with a group of Imperial officers and couldn't show his agitation by the tiniest look or gesture. He knew that the operation on Ussa should have been completed by now. Amie should be at the Eleven's safe house. But the coded signal hadn't been sent. Something must have gone wrong.

The Imperial ship dipped into the inner atmosphere of Coruscant. They headed for the busy high-clearance Imperial landing stage. Ferus wasn't used to arriving on Coruscant so officially. He'd had to sneak to and from the planet several times, and it hadn't been easy. Now clearances were completed in minutes, and soon he was ushered into a luxurious airspeeder and taken directly to one of the private small landing platforms at the Senate complex. There a military escort greeted him and ushered him to the office of the Inquisitors, several levels down from Palpatine's office in the Senate Tower.

The sergeant left him at Hydra's office door. She waved her hand over the sensor for him before pivoting and marching off.

A short, slender humanoid rose as Ferus walked in. He couldn't tell if Hydra was male or female, but he guessed she was a female. He couldn't guess at her homeworld. A hood covered her head and she wore the enveloping dark maroon of the

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Inquisitor team, the color that always reminded Ferus of dark blood. Her eyes were a pale silver color. She tipped back the hood and her shiny skull shone through a light stubble of hair. Her voice was husky. "Emperor Palpatine has directed me to be at your service."

Ferus inclined his head.

"You are to be in charge of the search for Force-adepts. We have made progress. I have a list of possibles for you. You may use my dataport." Hydra stiffly lifted an arm and pointed to a console. "I have already entered my password."

Ferus nodded. "I'd like to get started as soon as possible."

"Then begin."

Ferus sat at the console. The database had already been loaded. He scrolled through it.

"You'll see it has been ranked in terms of importance."

Number one was a "tall human male, silver hair, large build, homeworld unknown," who had slipped through a stormtrooper snare only a week before. Ry-Gaul. Ferus suddenly felt better. They'd actually tracked a Jedi. Maybe this list would prove valuable. He could help Ry-Gaul, set the Empire off on a false trail that would allow Ry-Gaul a chance to disappear completely.

Ferus went through the list. Some of the reports looked promising. A pilot in the Mid-Rim who made freight runs to the Core and made several extraordinary escapes from Imperial tails. A teacher who had single-handedly saved a school full of children from a sudden groundquake with such skill and speed that it had attracted attention. A bounty hunter. An account of a toddler on Alderaan who had seemed to sense danger before it happened, saving her minder. Sounded like a coincidence to Ferus. He ranked it last. The pilot, the teacher, and the bounty hunter all sounded promising.

The thought that any of them could be Jedi was the first ray of light in the dark days since Roan's death.

"I'll study this and get back to you with priorities," Ferus said. "We'll need a starship with a hyperdrive."

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“Already requisitioned. I will be accompanying you.”

Lucky me, Ferus thought. Hydra made the former Head Inquisitor Malorum look like the life of the party.

Hydra wanted to leave immediately, but Ferus managed to put off the trip until the next day, claiming he needed to do additional research.

At last he was free of the Empire.

With his credentials, Ferus moved easily through the checkpoints of the Senate complex. He passed through the entrance to EmPal and found Malory Lands waiting for him in the reception area. She was dressed in the white scrubs that all med personnel wore.

“Looks like you got a job,” Ferus said.

“Wasn’t hard,” she answered. “Follow me.”

She led him through a maze of hallways, passing closed door after closed door. Finally she reached one marked RADIATION UNIT. She handed Ferus some protective clothing, and he slipped it on.

Inside, the room hummed with machinery. A large transparisteel chamber stood in the center, surrounded by dataports and screens. “Advanced therapy for post-surgical procedures,” Malory explained. “The machines in here are highly calibrated. Any surveillance equipment would cause fused circuits and severe breakdowns. This is the only place I know where it’s safe to talk.”

“Is the entire place under surveillance?”

“I don’t think so, but main areas are monitored,” she said. “This is just a precaution. There are patrolling surveillance droids, but they’re supposedly for security. It’s mostly a rumor among the staff. They say there’s no such thing as a private conversation. I think it’s more likely that there are spies among them who get rewards for reporting back to the managers. Hard to tell, so far.” She shrugged. “Most med centers are rumor mills. No exception here. There’s even a rumor about a ghost. I can see

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why—this place is creepy.” She grinned, and for a moment Ferus saw the young woman inside the crisp professional.

“Can you give me access to records?”

“We’re in luck. All the record offices are fully staffed during the day, so there’s never really a chance to be in there alone. But...there’s a technician on the night shift named Jako. He’s going to be fired soon, he just doesn’t know it. He keeps getting partners, they keep requesting transfers, or they quit. I’m friends with the employment director—told her my cousin needs a job. So you’re in. You can bluff your way through with Jako. He’s not very bright.”

“Can we do it tonight?”

“Sure. Just do me a favor. Don’t get caught. There are rumors of medics who’ve disappeared. I don’t mind helping you, Ferus, but I’d like to stay healthy.”

Ferus looked at Malory, with her gaze so like Roan’s, and spoke the truth. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I’d die first.”

She grinned, and the flash of Roan hit him again. “Just so I’m not second.”

Chapter Ten

Ussans always began their workday early, in darkness, so that they could quit in late afternoon in order to take advantage of the long late afternoon light. In Ussa, twilight was called “the endless hour.” That was when families crowded the cafés and children played in the parks. Back in the time every Ussan could still remember, before the Empire came.

Before sunrise, they were crowding the streets and space lanes with airspeeders, packing the buses, and hurrying along the broad walkways. This crush was a crucial element in the plan to rescue Amie.

All members of the Eleven had spread the word. Even to those without jobs. And to the airbus drivers, the air taxis, the pedestrians. *Flood the streets and space lanes*, they’d said. *Create traffic, maybe an accident or two. Or three.* But they had to be careful. It had to look natural. They could not risk their children again.

Many were reluctant, especially those whose children had been taken only the week before. But the power of the Eleven and a personal appeal from Wil swayed them to the cause.

Clive had heard of the now-legendary cooperation of the Bellassan people. He knew that almost every citizen supported the Eleven. It was one reason why Ferus had been able to operate so long. No one betrayed him. No spies could be

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recruited by the Empire. But he had to admit he had cast a cynical eye on the Bellassan resistance from a distance. In his experience, beings could be noble, but only up to a point. Self-interest would always win out.

So he was stunned when the citizens of Ussa risked everything and took to the streets.

The crush of traffic was the perfect cover. Checkpoints were overwhelmed. Airspeeders idled, airbuses broke down. Pedestrians milled in small crowds, spreading into the lanes for wheeled traffic. And in the confusion, Amie was passed from vehicle to vehicle.

At the checkpoints, the stormtroopers couldn't handle the mass, so random gravsleds and airspeeders were able to break through and disappear into the chaos on the other side or down alleys that ran behind many of the twisting streets. Soon the garrisons sent out more stormtroopers, but it would take time before the city could be managed.

Clive's job was simply to keep Amie in sight and try to add to the chaos. He did his part, piloting an airspeeder and then abandoning it to block a lane, jumping aboard a gravsled and taking it through the back alleys to keep Amie in sight, who was now aboard a different speeder. Her last ride was with Dona again, this time in a utility skiff that the Eleven had blastproofed and secretly tweaked to give it advanced speed and agility.

All the while, more and more patrols appeared. The sky lanes were now thick with prowler vehicles trying to get a lock on Amie's position. But even the dreaded prowlers were having a hard time distinguishing between the vehicles and pedestrians jamming the streets.

They were almost to the last checkpoint. This would be the tricky part. No question. Clive knew the Jedi must be around him somewhere, but they were gleaming good at concealing themselves when they had to.

On foot now, he slowed to a walk. He could see Dona ahead at the checkpoint, several vehicles back in line. Wil was assigned

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the job of creating the diversion. Suddenly a garbage scow overturned, spewing foul-smelling material into the street. Airspeeders collided, an airbus let out all its passengers, and pedestrians ran from the garbage straight toward the checkpoint. At the same time Dona backed up her skiff, maneuvered around the checkpoint, and then zoomed forward.

She would have made it. As far as Clive could tell, everything had gone according to plan. But they couldn't plan for everything. They couldn't plan around the airspeeder full of stormtroopers that had been sent for reinforcements.

The airspeeder took off after Dona.

Clive was on foot. No one in line had reacted to the chase. The checkpoint line still moved. He flashed his ID docs and moved through. Then he picked up his pace and quickly joined the pedestrian walkway. As soon as he was out of sight of the guards, he began to run.

Dona pulled over. She knew she'd be blasted out of the skylane if she didn't. She was far ahead of him, and he dodged pedestrians, trying to keep her in sight without being too obvious about it. He saw her hand over her ID docs. The stormtrooper ordered her out.

One stormtrooper began to call in the information, while two others went to the back of the skiff. Clive's stomach twisted as they flung aside the tarp, but Amie had been hidden more cleverly than that. They stood examining the various items on the skiff.

Clive was just deciding on his next move when a streak of blasterfire suddenly ripped across the front of the Imperial airspeeder. A stormtrooper sitting in the pilot seat was hit. The blast didn't kill him but it did stun him. He was knocked backward, his helmet striking the seat.

Flame emerged from the crowd. In a flying leap, she booted the stormtrooper out of the seat and swung herself in. The airspeeder shot forward, plowing down the two stormtroopers who were inspecting the back of the skiff.

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As the first stormtrooper reached for his blaster, Flame vaulted over the back bed of the skiff and into the pilot seat. Dona jumped back aboard and the skiff took off. Blasterfire streaked through the air. Pedestrians flattened themselves on the roadway. Clive could see Ry-Gaul and Solace, concealed by the pileup of speeders, intercepting the fire with their lightsabers when they could.

The stormtroopers raced for their airspeeder. They ignored their injured comrade and jumped in.

Clive knew that the next move of the Jedi would be to engage the stormtroopers directly, probably through one of those Jedi Force-assisted giant leaps that would no doubt expose them to all and target them for a full-scale hunt.

He reached into his utility belt and withdrew two small objects. He threw them as hard as he could and watched in satisfaction as they hit the airspeeder's two exhaust pipes.

The repulsorlift engine fired, then died. The stormtrooper pounded on the control panel. The engine started up and died again.

Flame and Dona were well away by now. Clive reversed direction and then strolled down an intersecting boulevard. Amazing what some dried blumfruit strips and a little synthplaster could do. Bounce right into an exhaust and clog it just enough to stop an airspeeder from its needed acceleration boost. Who needed a blaster when you had good tools?

"She's hurt," Dona said.

Dona supported Flame as they staggered into the safe house. Amie hurried behind. The others crowded forward to ask questions, but Amie held up a hand.

"Stay back. I'm fine. Someone get me the med kit."

They all watched as Flame was lowered to the floor. She put her head back and closed her eyes. Once again Clive was jolted by a familiar feeling.

I've seen her before.

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Amie administered bacta and a painkiller. "It's not bad," she told Flame. "You'll be feeling better in a minute or two."

Flame nodded, biting her lip.

Only now did Amie allow Wil to approach her. He held out his arms and she stepped into them.

"Flame, we owe you a debt," Wil said.

Without opening her eyes, Flame said, "Do you trust me now?"

"We trust you," Amie said.

But Clive still wasn't sure.

He had an itch. And when he had an itch, he scratched.

He knew he wouldn't get rid of this nagging feeling until he did some digging. Toma had been the one to bring Flame to their attention. He had known her back on their shared homeworld, Acherin.

Clive sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was take a side trip to a planet he'd heard was in the middle of a civil war. But it looked like that's where he was going.

Chapter Eleven

Ferus filed in with the rest of the workers on the late shift. He wore the white med tunic with his ID tags around his neck. No one gave him a second glance. Following Malory's description he made his way through the hallways to the door marked INFORMATION CENTER. He swept his card through the sensor and heard the click with relief. Malory had promised she could enable him to enter, and she'd come through.

He had received at last the all-clear code from Wil on Bellassa. Amie was safe. He only hoped there wouldn't be a massive retaliation from the Imperial governor.

Here on the night shift there wasn't much to do for the info tech workers, so it was lightly staffed. A doctor or med trainee might call on them to enter a patient, but EmPal no longer had an emergency unit that took in all Coruscant citizens in need of care. Instead, patients were admitted by physicians. The high costs limited those admissions to Senators and the rich corporate people who now clogged Imperial City.

A plump young man sat at the console, crunching his way through a meal of root chips and a pressed protein slider. "Hey, new guy," he said as Ferus walked in.

Ferus sat at the other chair. "Ty Ambler," he said, giving the name on his ID tag.

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“Jakohaul Lessor,” he replied. “Just call me Jako. You just lucked into the sweetest job at EmPal, buddy. Not much doing here.”

“Suits me fine,” Ferus said. “I’m allergic to hard work.”

Jako chuckled. “Second that.” He pushed the greasy plate toward Ferus. “Want a root chip?”

“No thanks. I need to familiarize myself with the system.”

“Just don’t go crazy. We like to take it easy in this department.”

Ferus began to call up the database and flipped through it in a seemingly casual way. He zeroed in on records from the end of the Clone Wars, near the time that Darth Vader had first surfaced.

While Jako crunched beside him and called up a Podrace on his vidscreen, Ferus searched through the material. Nothing popped out at him. EmPal had been changing over from its old role as a medical center open to all to an exclusive med facility and biomechanical reconstruction center. He could find no record of extraordinary procedures or evidence of a cover-up. Then again, he hadn’t expected this to be easy.

Jako finished his meal and pushed back his rolling chair to rest his feet on the console. He crossed his arms on his chest. Ferus hoped he would go to sleep. The next step was to go deeper into the system, looking for security codes he could break. But the system might send up alarms or flashes that Jako could see from his position.

“Listen, new guy, I’m going to take a snooze,” Jako said. “Don’t wake me up if work calls. And don’t be scared of the ghost!” he chortled.

Ferus was relieved as Jako’s eyes closed.

The ghost. Malory had mentioned it, too.

“What ghost?” he asked.

Jako’s eyes flew open, but he didn’t seem annoyed at being disturbed. “It happened about a year ago,” he said, lowering his voice to a ragged whisper. “Near the very end of the Clone Wars.

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A scream was heard. A scream so terrible and so loud that it echoed throughout the building and made the sensors go crazy. It was said that one med worker lost his hearing. *Permanently*. The med workers searched and searched for the source of the sound, but there was...nothing. There was only a handful of patients at that time. It had seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, but no patient had done it.” Jako’s voice had lowered to a whisper. “It was as though all the dead of the Clone Wars had screamed their death cries at the same time, then gone back to being dead.”

Ferus knew that in his slightly incoherent way Jako was trying to spook him, and it had worked. Just not in the way he’d thought.

Jako winked. “Enjoy the night shift.” He closed his eyes again, and, smiling, was asleep in seconds.

Ferus thought once more about Vader’s prosthetics. They were extensive, from a breath-mask to vision enhancement to possible artificial limbs. He was fairly certain that Vader had at least one artificial hand. And he was regulated by what seemed to be a complex biosystem within that suit.

For the first time, Ferus wondered what awful injuries he must have sustained. What had *happened* to the guy?

He had been chasing the wrong idea. Vader, whoever he was, must have been in terrible pain.

Ferus turned back to his console. He dumped the med records he’d been searching. There would be no mention there, not even behind security shields. He was suddenly positive of that. Instead, he accessed the blueprints of the building.

Everywhere and nowhere.

His instincts had kicked in, and he knew he was right. Somewhere in this building, Darth Vader had been born.

Chapter Twelve

Sano Sauro's career might be ruined, but it wasn't over. He still had favors to call in, and if Senators and functionaries thought he'd just go away, they had another thing coming. He had been close to power, and he would be again.

His office in the Senate, that grand chamber that had trumpeted his power to one and all...that was gone, given to the Senator of some big Core system who had rolled over for the Emperor and needed to be thanked. Sauro was stuck in a tiny office at the new Imperial Navy building. His job was to oversee the new Naval Academy. One school, in comparison to whole systems!

And, to make matters worse, those below him who had served him, fools who had done just what he wanted but had never been able to come up with an original plan on their own—fools like Bog Divinian—they were now Imperial governors. Wielding power without knowing what to do with it.

Sauro coughed in his handkerchief. The bile inside him was giving him trouble. His nights were restless, his days filled with bitterness. He had to get out of here. He had to rise again, and he had to wreak vengeance on those who had crossed him or, worse, patronized him.

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His assistant, a dolt sent by the Imperial administration office, came in, looking nervous. “A communication for you, Lord Sauro.”

“I’m not a lord. Call me Senator Sauro.”

“But you’re not a Senator...anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Sauro snapped. “I still have the title!”

“Senator Sauro, a communication for you.”

“Who is it? I’m busy.”

“Lord Vader. He’s a lord, isn’t he?”

Sauro’s eyes widened. “You left Lord Vader waiting? Put him through to my private holo-line immediately, you idiot!”

He was surrounded by fools.

He swiveled as the small holo-image surfaced on his desk.

“Greetings, Senator Sauro.”

“It is an honor to—”

“I am running a project on a strictly ‘need-to-know’ basis. I am looking for a recruit at the Naval Academy to volunteer for the project.”

“Of course, I’ll arrange it right away. Any requirements? Top of their class? Sons and daughters of those in favor?”

“No. Avoid those. And any children of Senators, anyone who might ask questions. Discretion is key. Some hungry recruit, someone desperate to rise. We will start with one recruit and move on if we need to.”

“May I ask—”

“No, you may not. Just send me a student.”

“Immediately, Lord Vader.”

Without another word, the hologram faded.

How was he supposed to do this? He didn’t get involved with the recruit brats. He couldn’t name even one. He’d have to rely on Maggis, his second-in-command, to choose.

Sauro smiled. This was still good news. At last, a favor. His career turnaround was about to begin.

He drummed his fingers on his desk. What would make this even sweeter was if he could deliver some payback at the same

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time. Wasn't Bog Divinian's son enrolled in the school? It was clear to Sauro that whatever this project was, it was not something you'd want your child involved in. That would be tasty revenge.

Vader had told him the recruit should have a low profile. He couldn't ignore the direct order.

But if Bog *volunteered* his son...that would be different.

He just couldn't know he was being steered to do so.

Given Bog's level of intelligence, this wouldn't be a problem. The key to getting Bog to do something, Sauro had found, was to make him think he was being excluded.

He turned to his comlink. It was time Maggis called Bog in for a parent–advisor conference.

A short time later, Bog Divinian settled into the chair opposite Maggis at his desk. “So, how is my boy doing?”

“Well enough,” Maggis said. “There's always an adjustment period. And since you told me that his mother was not in agreement about his training, I assume that he'll take a little time to settle in.”

“I wouldn't assume that,” Bog said, rankled by the suggestion. “He's a good boy. Smart boy. Takes directions well—at least when his mother isn't around. Talk about a bad influence!” He laughed, but Maggis didn't join in.

Bog didn't know how Maggis had landed this job. Only Sauro was above him. Maggis seemed lazy and out of shape, two traits Bog didn't imagine would be tolerated by the Imperial code. Maybe Sauro liked to put incompetents in positions underneath him to make himself look better.

It was only the beginning of the Empire. Lots of jockeying for power going on. The cream would rise to the top. Just as he did.

A light lit up on Maggis's console. “Excuse me, I have to take this,” Maggis said.

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Annoyed, Bog didn't move. The nerve of the guy, taking a comm when Bog was there! Probably some whiny parent keeping tabs on his son or daughter.

"It's from Senator Sauro," Maggis said pointedly.

"Hey, Sano is a buddy of mine. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I listened in."

Before Maggis could move, Bog reached over and switched the comm to holo-mode. Maggis couldn't do anything—Bog was an Imperial governor.

Sano appeared in holo-form. Bog stood in front of the monitor. "Hey, surprise, old friend, it's me. Good to see you. Been meaning to contact you—I just got into Imperial City today." Not really—he'd been there a week.

"Where's Maggis?" Sauro asked.

Maggis moved forward. "Here, sir."

Sauro hesitated. Bog knew Sauro didn't want him to remain, but he couldn't ask him to leave. Bog was now several notches above him in rank, and his security clearance was now higher. Bog smiled, enjoying his former mentor's discomfort.

"Go ahead, Sano-mano," Bog said. "Maybe I can help."

"Maggis, I need a recruit volunteer for a special project," Sauro said. "He or she should be both intelligent and also have unquestioning loyalty to the Empire. Therefore, no new recruits. This comes straight from Lord Vader's office, so give it top priority."

"What's the nature of the project, sir?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis," Sauro snapped. "I want a name tonight."

"But I'd have to get parental permission—"

"There's no time. Just follow my instructions."

The hologram faded.

"Sounds like you got your tail whipped there, young fellow," Bog said.

Maggis ignored the comment. He sat down heavily.

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Unlike Maggis, Bog felt exhilarated. Vader! What luck! Bog couldn't imagine how many political points he'd score by getting Lune into the program.

"I'm going to help you out here, Maggis," he said. "I'm going to volunteer my boy. You couldn't ask for a better kid. Smart. Follows orders. Loyal."

"He's very young. And he's only just arrived. Senator Sauro specified older recruits."

"Not really. You've got to learn to listen carefully. He said 'unquestioning loyalty to the Empire.' Now, that's a different thing. That's what my boy has."

Maggis stared at him. "I don't know if I'd...- characterize your son that way."

"I would. Special boy." Bog leaned back. "I think you'd want to succeed with this one. Pleasing Lord Vader—shouldn't take that lightly. I'd be talking to Sauro, too. Telling him how helpful you were. I'm sure you want to succeed in the job. We all want to see you succeed. You have such a bright future ahead of you."

Maggis moved a durasheet from one corner of his desk to another. Bog wasn't concerned with his reluctance. He would cave. Loyalty. That's what the Empire was all about. Those who practiced it would receive their rewards. Maggis knew that.

Maggis cleared his throat. "Governor Divinian, I'll recommend your son for the project. Of course."

Chapter Thirteen

As he flew in low over the plains and cities of Acherin, Clive was shocked at the devastation. The planet had been blasted back to pre-tech times. The infrastructure had been blown to bits. The citizens were living in rubble.

When the Clone Wars began, Acherin had escaped any brushes with the conflict. They'd sided with the Separatists and were protected by an orbiting team of battleships from the Trade Federation. Their industries were too precious to lose. But a growing movement on Acherin began to side with the Republic, and after the wars ended, opposition to the Empire was fierce and vocal. Then the Imperial troops arrived, establishing garrisons and taking over major industries. Even the supporters of the Separatists joined the revolt.

The Acherins fought fiercely but were defeated. It was while under Imperial control that a civil war broke out between longstanding rival factions. The factions were concentrated in two cities, the ancient city of Eluthan and the larger, more cosmopolitan business center of Sood. The Imperials had closed their garrisons and moved all the factories off-planet. Acherin was no longer of any use to them. They left the planet without law, without government, without a power grid.

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And now the devastation they left behind was being ground into dust by the Acherins themselves.

When Clive had been on the asteroid base, he'd spent time talking to its keepers, Toma and Raina, natives of Acherin. He knew about their lives before the Empire had invaded. He knew what Acherin had been. Now he saw how beings could be truly beaten and broken. They would have to rebuild their civilization from scratch without the resources to do it. But even so, the two factions were fighting each other for control, and as a result no progress could be made.

On his flight he had managed to reach Toma. Communication with the asteroid was difficult and he'd had to try again and again. When he'd reached Toma, they limited their conversation, not wanting a signal to be picked up. But Toma had managed to give him the lead he needed.

Toma had known Flame in the underground, so he'd known only her code name. She'd surfaced after the Empire had arrived. Toma had been the commander of the military arm of the resistance, so he hadn't had much direct contact with Flame. But a trusted friend had reached him on a secret comm account he had set up and told him that a former comrade needed his help.

The blockade of the planet had ended, and it was easy for Clive to land in the outskirts of the ancient city of Eluthan. There was no checkpoint, no controls. He simply hid his transport in the canyons and walked toward the walled city.

He followed the twisting streets, occasionally consulting his datapad for directions. Without landmarks, it was easy to get lost. The city bore little resemblance to the glorious place he'd heard about. The dwellings had been built of a stone that must have been beautiful once, a soft golden color that turned into liquid fire in the setting sun. But the houses and public buildings had been blasted down to stumps and repaired with plastoid parts. There were large open squares that had once held grass but now were hard-packed dirt. He could see open fires and makeshift dwellings, the shadows of Acherins preparing the evening meal.

Jude Watson

A sense of defeat rose from the stones and the ground. Clive knew that seeing this would break Toma and Raina's hearts.

He found the street he was looking for and looked for the coordinates. Any markings had long been lost. He saw a slender figure sitting on a half-blasted stairway and stopped. It was an Acherin woman, her hair short and thick with dust. Dirt streaked her tunic and one boot had a long slash down the side. It was held together with twine.

"Good evening," Clive said.

"Ah, an optimist."

He tried again. "I'm looking for Vira." Clive knew the Acherin tradition was to use first names. It was considered insulting to use someone's full name, even for a stranger. He hoped the Acherin traditions of hospitality still held.

"And who's asking?"

"Clive," he said. "Toma sent me."

This got her attention. "Toma," she breathed. "So he *is* alive."

"Alive and well and sending his regards to Vira."

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "There's no way to say this easily. Vira was killed in the fighting. She lived with us. I was her sister-in-law."

So he had come to a dead end.

She saw the disappointment on his face. "But perhaps my husband, Alder, can help you. He was good friends with Toma, too."

She stood, and he saw how tall she was. "I'm his wife, Halle. Come inside. Please."

She pushed through a makeshift plastoid door. Inside was a bombed-out building that had once been a house. A tarp served as a roof. Rubble had been cleared out and planks set on the ground for a floor. Clive noted it was swept clean.

"We don't have much, but we will gladly share," Halle said.

"Why don't you leave?" Clive asked. "There's no restriction on emigration, is there?"

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“No,” she answered quietly. “But this is my home. If we didn’t rebuild, who would? The Empire? What kind of homeworld would we have then?”

A tattered cloth between two columns parted, and an equally tall and imposing man walked in. “Alder, this is Clive,” Halle said. “Toma sent him to Vira.”

Alder walked forward, a shadow in his dark eyes at the mention of his sister. “Toma? Where is he?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Clive replied. “But I can tell you he’s well.”

“Thank the moons and stars. Loss is part of our lives here now—may Vira rest with the ancients—so it’s good to hear that Toma is well. Here, sit down,” Alder said. “It’s almost time for the evening meal.”

By the looks of things, they didn’t have much in the way of food. Luckily, Clive had laid in supplies. He put his utility pack on the table. “Let the visitor supply the meal. It’s a custom of my world.” Not really true, but he had a feeling they wouldn’t accept otherwise.

“You honor us with your gift,” Halle said.

Clive took out bread and protein loaf, a cylinder of prepared tea, and fruit. He added a bag of sweets and some reconstituted muffins.

Alder’s eyes widened. “It’s a feast!”

“First, eat. Then we can talk.” Clive waved his hand at the food.

He took a few bites but mostly watched them eat hungrily. It amazed him how connected beings were to their homeworlds. He had left his homeworld of Belazura behind long ago and rarely returned. Belazura was renowned for its beauty, but Clive didn’t have a particle of sentiment in his bones. He felt more comfortable moving from planet to planet. He rarely stayed anywhere long. If he had to live like this, he would have left long ago.

Jude Watson

When he was sure they had eaten their fill, Clive poured them each a last cup of tea and sat back. “Toma told me that Vira could tell me about Flame. Flame contacted her and asked for a way to find Toma.”

“Vira didn’t tell us,” Alder said. “She must have kept Flame’s secret well.”

“We knew Flame,” Halle said. “Well, not before she joined the resistance—she didn’t live in the old city. She was from the capital, Sood. She said she came from a wealthy family, but we didn’t share much information about our personal lives.”

“Do you have any idea of her real identity?” Clive asked.

Halle and Alder both shook their heads.

“You could tell she came from wealth,” Alder said. “But she never put on airs, she never asked for favors. She wasn’t a principal player, but she did surveillance, set up safe houses, things like that. She took the same risks we all did.”

“She was very smart, very good,” Halle said. “Rumors were that she smuggled much of her wealth off-planet. At first she was resented for this. Eluthans thought it showed a lack of loyalty to the homeworld. But Flame just laughed at that. She felt she would only be able to fight if she had the wealth to do it.”

“She was caught by the Empire and imprisoned at the garrison,” Alder said. “She managed to escape. In that escape she also rescued five members of the underground. One of them was killed, but she got the others out.”

“One of them was Vira,” Alder added.

Clive felt a bit sheepish. Flame truly was a hero. He had wasted his time. Time he should have been spending on Coruscant, helping Astri to rescue Lune. Everything had checked out.

So why didn’t he feel better?

“Flame told Toma that her family owned some of the biggest factories on Acherin,” Clive said. “And her funds do seem enormous. There can’t have been that many family-owned industries. Is there a database I can check?”

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Alder shook his head. "All of our records have been destroyed."

"I always thought..." Halle's voice faltered. "No, never mind."

"What?" Clive urged.

"Well, Flame was a good pilot. If we had a job that required flying, we gave it to her."

Clive nodded. He knew this about Flame, too.

"And once she'd mentioned to me that her father had died right before she came to us. Her grief was fresh." Halle hesitated again. "Yarrow Industries was a big manufacturer of luxury airspeeders and cruisers. Evin Yarrow died of natural causes shortly after the Empire took over his business. I know he had an adult daughter. Eve. I would imagine that a daughter raised in that industry would be an exceptional pilot."

"Yarrow Industries," Clive said. Once again he felt a distant chime inside him. Whatever memory he was chasing was elusive. Why couldn't he remember? "It sounds familiar."

"Most of their sales were confined to this system, but they were trying to break into galactic sales," Halle said. "Like most of the corporations, they sided with the Separatists. They wanted the support of the Trade Federation and the Commerce and Banking clans. I remember that Evin Yarrow kept an apartment in Galactic City on Coruscant so he could lobby the Senate."

"Was he married?"

She shook her head. "His wife died when the girl was young. I read an article about him in a holo-zine years ago....I remember being impressed with how he said he raised his daughter himself, took her with him everywhere—factories, trade shows, the Senate....She was a young girl then. I think there was a holo-image, but I don't remember it clearly."

"Wouldn't someone have recognized Eve Yarrow?" Clive asked.

"Not really," Alder said. "Eluthans didn't travel much to Sood."

Jude Watson

"I don't know anything else about Eve. Our holo-news industry and all the information infrastructure collapsed around the time Flame joined us," Halle said. "We didn't ask anybody too many questions at that time. I know that the Empire eventually moved Yarrow Industries off-planet." She shrugged. "I'm probably wrong about Eve."

"Is there a reason you're asking these questions?" Alder asked.

"I need to find out if Flame is trustworthy," Clive said. "Lives depend on it."

"I would trust her with our lives," Alder said. "We *did* trust her with our lives."

Clive nodded. Made sense. But his itch was still there.

What about Halle's quiet resolve to stay and rebuild her homeworld? What about the other citizens, sticking it out, trying to rebuild with bits of plastoid and tarps?

Why had Flame left? Why had this one woman decided that she would be able, single-handedly, to create a galaxy-wide resistance movement?

Could she be Eve Yarrow? If that was true, she would have traveled the galaxy with her father. He'd had an apartment on Coruscant. What had she said again? *Never been there*. She didn't like crowded planets. She said.

Of course, he knew better than anyone that resistance fighters never told the truth about where they'd been and what they'd done.

She'd called it Imperial City, though. That bothered him. Of course Palpatine had renamed it. But every member of the resistance still called it by what they considered its rightful name, Galactic City. At least when they spoke to one another.

Well, that wasn't much to go on.

"Those people she rescued from the garrison," he said. "Can I talk to them?"

"There is only one left," Alder said. "The rest have been killed since that time, or arrested. His name is Warlin. I can contact him for you. I'm sure he'll agree to a meeting. If he's here."

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“He goes to Sood undercover fairly often,” Halle explained. “His daughter is married to a Sood, so he travels to see her. It’s very dangerous, but...she’s his only family.”

Alder took out his comlink and entered the data. He spoke into it, quickly explaining who Clive was and asking if Warlin would speak to him.

Clive took the comlink. There was no picture, but Warlin’s voice came through clearly. “Come at dawn tomorrow,” he said.

“I’d like to come tonight.”

“Not possible, I’m traveling. I’ll meet you at my house—Alder can lead you there.” There was a burst of static, and Clive missed his next words.

“I didn’t hear you—what was that?”

“I have been waiting for this. Something about...that day...always bothered me.”

The communication ended. Frustrated, Clive handed the comlink back to Alder.

He would have to wait until tomorrow.

He knew he would barely sleep that night, and he didn’t. It was still black outside when he rose and quietly pulled on his boots. Alder came a moment later, just a shadow in the darkness.

Without a word, Clive rose and followed him through the empty streets. The moons hung low in the sky and only the softest smudge of gray signaled the beginning of the day. Even with the bit of light it was still hard going on the pockmarked stone walkway. Occasionally they stepped into the road and slogged through the mud created by an overnight rain. The drops had snaked rivulets through the dust-shrouded plastoid. Soon, Clive was completely lost in a world of dirt and rain.

“He’s just up ahead,” Alder said. “And the sun is coming up.”

Pale fiery light lit the edge of the building. It had come through better than most, with a whole stone wall intact. Alder walked forward and knocked on the wooden door. Clive heard the echo inside.

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When no one came to the door, Alder turned to him. “Maybe he was delayed.”

“Maybe.” Clive stepped forward and pushed against the door. Something was against it on the other side. Something soft. With dread in his throat now, he pushed harder.

Legs. Arms. And then, with the door half-open, he saw the man, curled up, one arm outflung, sightless eyes open.

“Warlin?” Clive asked.

Alder nodded. He knelt and closed Warlin’s eyes. “Rest with the ancients, my good friend,” he said softly. He looked up at Clive, anguish on his face.

“This is what has happened to us,” he said. “Acherins killing Acherins. Some in Eluthan thought he was a spy. He took too many chances. Just so he could see his daughter. They killed him for that.”

But was that why he’d been killed? Clive wondered.

He wanted to howl his frustration. He’d never know.

Chapter Fourteen

Trever waited after lights-down. All the first-year recruits had chambers near each other. The rooms were packed tightly in a grid in the center of the complex. Every ten rooms shared a common room with banks of consoles for research purposes. From his chamber he could see the common room door.

Soon he saw Lune move like a shadow through the hallway. He slipped into the common room and the door slid shut. Technically, the recruits were supposed to retire when the lights went down, but this rule, Trever saw, was one of the few that wasn't enforced. The workload was so crushing that patrols looked the other way if students were still at dataports late at night.

Trever waited a few minutes and then darted across the hall and accessed the common room door. Lune sat at a console.

Trever sat next to him. "We should explore the delivery points for food and materials...maybe there's a way out that way."

"All pickups are scanned," Lune said. "In the first week, somebody tried to get out and he was packed off to solitary for two weeks. Then he had to have a shadow, like I do."

"Okay then, do you have any ideas?"

"The hangar," Lune said. "Tomorrow we have a special piloting class there, right?"

Jude Watson

“And?”

Lune shrugged. “We steal a ship.”

“Steal a ship? Hey, that’s a full moon idea. No problem. While Maggis is teaching, we just hop in the cockpit and...”

“No, not while he’s teaching,” Lune said. He turned and looked at Trever. Trever felt a jolt. Lune was younger than he was, just a skinny kid, but his intensity was spooky. He had a feeling Lune *could* figure out how to break in and steal a ship.

“You always brag about cracking security systems,” Lune said.

“Well, sure,” Trever said. “I can steal a transport. No problem. Maybe break into a warehouse. But this is *Imperial* security.”

“Every system has a flaw. You just have to find it. I heard that somewhere,” Lune said.

Trever grinned. Lune had heard it from him. He’d heard it from Ferus. “Well, I do happen to have a couple of half-alpha charges. Not enough to blast down a hangar door, I don’t think, but we could try.”

Lune shook his head. “That’s a last resort. If you can’t hotwire the ship, we have to be able to go back to our quarters. Then we wait for another chance.”

“So how are we getting into the hangar?”

“The security codes for the classrooms and hangar are changed every twelve hours. Maggis will have the code for the hangar on his security card since he’s going to teach a class there first thing in the morning.”

“The security card is clipped to his tunic,” Trever said. “That’s the first problem. The second one is that he’d notice it was gone in about two seconds flat. He needs that card to go just about anywhere.”

Lune held up the card. “He doesn’t need it while he’s in the refresher.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You stole Maggis’s security card?”

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“Every night Maggis takes a shower and then a long steam. He’s in there for forty-five minutes, minimum. Plenty of time.”

Trever shook his head at Lune’s audacity. “What are we waiting for?”

The hallways were dark, but they were able to move quickly. Those reprogrammed battle droids made random checks, but they announced their imminent arrival with the clack of circuits, and they were easy to avoid, thanks to Lune’s Force-ability to hear things from corridors away. They reached the hangar without being spotted.

Lune quickly swiped the card. The door slid open.

“Full moon amazing,” Trever breathed. “It worked.”

They hurried inside. The ships looked ghostly in the dim light, like giant creatures ready to pounce. Trever quickly headed toward the first starship, a tidy little number that was built for inner atmosphere traffic. The ramp had been left down and he raced up it and swung into the cockpit. He didn’t dare start the engines yet, but he quickly flipped through a systems check.

“I’m going to have to override a security code,” he whispered to Lune. “It might take a few minutes.”

“Hurry.”

Trever ran through the coding, trying to break it. It was more complicated than a standard security code. He tried all his tricks, but nothing worked. He went back and studied the console carefully. He’d have to think his way through this one.

“Trev, duck!”

He hesitated for only a moment and went down just as the door opened and the lights went on to full power. Footsteps started across the duracrete floor.

Underneath the console, Trever and Lune stared at each other, wide-eyed. Their only hope was to remain quiet. They had to hope that whoever it was wasn’t searching for them.

The footsteps came closer. And closer. Trever felt the craft quiver as footsteps thudded up the ramp. Then boots appeared, striding into the cockpit.

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A pair of dark, sleepy eyes in a pudgy face appeared, ducking under the console. “Imagine my surprise when I emerged from my relaxing steam to find my security card gone. Imagine when I plugged into security and found I was actually in the hangar.”

“We were just—”

“Spare me the ‘we-were-justs.’ Believe me, I’ve heard just about every ‘we-were-just’ ever invented. Now squirm out, worms.”

Maggis backed up so that Trever and Lune could wriggle out.

“Divinian, you stay with me. Fortin, get yourself back to your chamber. And try not to break another rule. Or run into Kestrel.”

“It was my idea,” Trever blurted. “Divinian shouldn’t be punished, he—”

“I’m not hearing this,” Maggis said. “Any more degrades and you get sent to the solitary chamber.”

Trever shut up. He couldn’t help Lune in solitary.

Stormtroopers marched in. “Escort Recruit Fortin to his chamber and lock him in,” Maggis said. “If he moves, stun him.”

The troopers surrounded Trever. He had no choice. Feeling helpless, he threw Lune one last look and walked out.

Chapter Fifteen

“C’mon,” Maggis said to Lune. “This way.”

Lune felt tremors of nervousness moving through Maggis. Shouldn’t *he* be the one to be nervous?

He didn’t know whether it was a connection to the Living Force or not, but he’d always been aware of emotions. It was one reason he’d always been afraid of his father. He’d always known how much Bog had pretended. Pretended to be a husband. Pretended to be a father. Bog’s real self had leaked out no matter how much he tried to pretend.

Was it so wrong, Lune wondered for the thousandth time, not to love your own father?

It was a question he just couldn’t ask his mother. He knew she would give him a careful answer. He was too young to be told the truth. Instead, Mom would call Bog “confused” or “too ambitious.”

No, Mom. Dad is a bad guy.

Why was Maggis nervous? Why did he keep looking back at Lune?

He’s doing something he knows isn’t right.

“Where am I going?” Lune asked. For the first time, he was afraid.

Jude Watson

“Shut up.” Maggis didn’t say this in a mean tone. It was more like Lune was reminding him of his own unease.

The retractable roof opened, and an airspeeder zoomed in, a sleek black number with red chromium trim. The closed cockpit rolled back and a man got out.

It was his father.

Lune stopped walking.

“No,” he said.

“Your father needs you, Divinian,” Maggis said. “And,” he added, “I need you to follow orders. Remember, I’ve got your friend here. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to Fortin, would you?”

Lune’s mouth set. Trever could take care of himself.

Probably.

“And if you don’t go, do you know who your dad will be most angry at?”

“You.”

“Try again. Your mom. He blames everything on her, right? I got that much after ten minutes with him. He’ll blame this on her, too.”

Lune looked at Maggis. He felt the truth of what he said. It made him feel trapped.

“Son.” Nervous at the delay, Bog walked forward. He smiled. It was his fatherly smile that was so fake. All Lune saw in that smile was a big empty hole.

“Don’t worry, I have good news,” Bog continued. “Take a ride with me and I’ll tell you about it.”

Dread settled inside Lune. He knew he was trapped. There was nowhere to go. He walked forward and climbed into Bog’s airspeeder.

“Let me know how—” Maggis started to say to Bog, but Bog ignored him.

He settled behind the controls. The cockpit canopy slid closed and sealed Lune in.

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“Hang on,” Bog said with a satisfied air. “I bought this baby after I became Imperial governor. It moves.”

The craft shot out into the black night. Lune didn’t know Coruscant well, so he wasn’t sure where they were going. He just saw a blur of sky lanes and millions of lights, each of them a life going on quietly around him. He could feel them. He envied them. They were living their lives, but they weren’t at the mercy of someone else. Or at least, that was what he hoped.

In his training, Garen had spoken to him about the Living Force, how some Jedi were more connected with it than others. He had talked about the great Jedi Knight, Qui-Gon Jinn. He had said that he felt a similar thing with Lune, that he could connect to the Living Force. If times were different, if he’d been identified earlier, if the Clone Wars hadn’t come along...he could have been at the Temple, too.

The Temple was now rising in front of him, a ruin of its former self. Lune could feel the dark side of the Force in its presence, feel all the lives that had been snuffed out.

Bog chortled as he zoomed around the Temple. The Senate complex was below them now, and Bog guided the craft to a tower that rose in a far quadrant. Was his father taking him to the Senate? Lune couldn’t figure it out.

Bog parked the vehicle on a landing stage, a long narrow platform that extended out like a horizontal spire.

“Don’t look so nervous,” he said. “This is your moment, Lunie.”

Lunie. He’d always hated that nickname. He had told his father that. Many times.

Bog leaned in closer. His eyes were intense. “You get this? This is your big chance. I arranged it. Why do I bother, you ask. Because I’m your dad. Simple as that.”

Bog exited the airspeeder and waited for Lune to get out. Lune followed him past a set of double doors. They entered a white hallway. He smelled medicine and cleaner. He knew this smell. He was in a hospital.

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“This is where the Emperor’s friends come for treatment. It’s an honor to be chosen for this,” Bog said. “Understand?”

Lune shook his head. He understood nothing.

Except that he was in big trouble.

Amazing that Bog Divinian’s kid could have a Force connection. It must have come from Astri Oddo, not Bog. The man seemed to wear stupidity like a hat. Darth Vader watched as Bog hustled importantly into one of the EmPal conference rooms. He’d left Lune with the med droids in the adjoining examination room. They were in the main complex here and would take care of the initial steps. Then Lune would be taken to the secret rooms at the top of the tower. And Bog would go away.

Sano Sauro had told him that Bog had volunteered his own child for this assignment. Vader didn’t care who Zan Arbor used for her subject, so he’d allow it. No doubt Bog would think that he would gain points for Lune’s participation. Instead, he’d just added to Vader’s contempt.

Bog eagerly came forward. “When I told my son the Empire needed him, he stepped up,” he said. “Didn’t hesitate a moment. But now that we’re here, I’d like to know what exactly it is that he’s volunteering *for*.”

Jenna Zan Arbor looked at Vader. “Did he sign a release?”

“Not yet.”

She looked exasperated. “Can I proceed without it? I don’t have time for difficult parents.”

“Now, who are you calling difficult? I’m easy.” Bog smiled. “But I guess I have to point out, because maybe you don’t know, but I’m an Imperial governor. Just want to make that clear. I’ve got clearance. Maybe more than you.”

Zan Arbor sized him up. “I doubt it.”

“So, what’s the project? I deserve to be in the old laser-loop.”

Vader controlled his irritation. Divinian was making a *demand*? His self-importance needed to be checked, but not here. Not yet.

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He needed the boy.

"This is Dr. Zan Arbor," Vader said. "She is doing a series of tests on memory."

"That's all?" Bog looked relieved for a moment. Then his forehead creased. "But what...exactly will you do?"

"Pinpoint certain areas of the brain," Zan Arbor answered. "Identify memory receptors and target them for elimination."

Bog swallowed. "Elimination? What does that mean, exactly?"

"Well, obviously, some memories that the child has will disappear," Zan Arbor said. "As if they had never existed." She waved a hand. "Just inconsequential ones. Naturally I'll just take random memories from different time frames. He'll never know what's missing."

"Wait a second here," Bog said. "I don't know about this. I didn't know...his *brain* would be involved. Brains are important."

Zan Arbor rolled her eyes, but Vader silenced her with a look. Bog was an idiot, but he could make trouble.

Vader turned to Bog. "We all have memories we might wish to obliterate. Even a child. *Especially* a child. You could give direction to Dr. Zan Arbor."

Zan Arbor understood his meaning immediately. It would take Bog longer. She looked alert, excited. "You mean target something big? With this boy? That would be...helpful."

"My boy is not an experiment!" Bog boomed, but Vader wasn't about to stop.

"It is to help him," he said. "Maybe your boy has memories that could be...painful. Memories of...his mother, for example?"

He watched as Bog recoiled. And then he saw the greed take over.

Greed for control. Control of his son.

Bog licked his lips. "You could...pinpoint that area?"

"If you give me a time frame," Zan Arbor said. Speaking in a low tone, she drew Bog away.

Vader didn't care particularly if Bog gave permission or not, although it would be easier that way. On second thought, Lune

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was the perfect subject. He was Force-sensitive. Vader wasn't sure if the Force would be an obstacle to the success of the experiment. He doubted it. Lune wasn't in control of the Force, for one thing. But if, in fact, the Force would interfere with the procedure, he would need to know that.

He watched as Bog allowed Zan Arbor to take his retinal print to authorize the procedure. Then the scientist left Bog and entered the locked examination room where Lune was waiting surrounded by med droids.

"You can go now," Vader said. "I will contact you when it is time to pick him up."

Bog looked disappointed that he couldn't wait. But he knew better than to argue.

Vader turned and headed toward the inner core of the tower. Success would mean an end to torment. It was unsettling being in the place where he had learned about Padmé...and after the battle with Obi-Wan.

Yet there was compensation here, Sith crystals and artifacts that would restore him. And there was hope here now. Hope for the end of Padmé at last.

Chapter Sixteen

Interesting, Ferus thought. He was definitely on to something. He'd gone through the blueprints and then, once Jako had fallen into a deep snore, he'd left the room to do a visual surveillance at the Coruscant EmPal med center, using the terrace that circled the building and then some judicious Force-leaps.

He knew one thing for sure: The windowed gallery at the top of the tower was there just for show. The top of the tower wasn't the storage area the blueprints had claimed. It only looked that way.

Ferus had used a Force-technique called "thoughtful looking." It involved shifting one's concentration back and forth from the big picture to the microscopic. The method often helped a Jedi to be able to see things that even electrobinoculars didn't pick up. Ferus had seen the tiniest flaw on the metallic skin surface of the high levels of the tower. It had probably been hit by some stray debris—just a slight, glancing blow, but it was enough to ripple the metal sheeting.

And that's when he figured out that it wasn't just a durasteel scrim, but some sort of alloy used for blast protection. Probably duranium. It wasn't skin; it was armor.

Once he'd seen that, he continued his inspection until he'd found what he was looking for—the slightest of bumps, regularly

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spaced, indicating power feed lines. Enough power feed lines to supply a turbolaser.

He had to ask himself why a storage area needed blast protection as well as offensive weapons.

He had to get in there.

The facility was quiet now. Patients were in for the night with only regularly timed checks by the med droids. Malory had given him the schedule. Ferus walked through the halls and hopped on the turbolift. He waved his hand over the sensor for the topmost floor. He knew from the blueprints that this turbolift didn't go all the way to the top of the tower. None of the nearby ones did. No doubt there was one, but it would take him ages to find it. He only had less than an hour before the end of his shift; at dawn, his security card would become inactive and the place would start to come alive.

There was a small service turbolift, built for the med droids. It ran from the landing stage up to the tower. This turbolift also went to the landing stage and terminated there. At that point the two shafts had an access point, no doubt to allow worker access in the event of repairs or breakdown.

He hoisted himself up to the top of the turbolift and pushed through the access door. He stood on the top, balancing on the speeding cab. The numbers were a blur on the walls as the floors were counted off, but he would be able to see when the shaft ended. The only trouble was that he'd be going very, very fast.

He called on the Force. Time needed to slow down. Everything had to be absolutely clear. He needed perfect timing. And luck. Luck would be good.

Not luck, he told himself. He had to get out of those old patterns of thinking. Jedi didn't need luck. They had the Force.

He had to believe. Believe he could fly into the other shaft completely blind, not knowing if there would be something, somewhere, to grab onto.

There. There it was. Through the blackness and the rushing air he could see the ceiling of this shaft. And there, on his left, a

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small shift in the darkness that indicated the opening to the parallel shaft. Ferus gulped. It looked awfully...small. He had to have perfect accuracy in timing and position or he'd hit a permacrete wall at top speed and turn into Jedi-jam....

Ferus told his mind to shut up and let the Force work.

No room for doubt.

He leaped.

He felt the Force move around him. He could see everything up close and clearly—the texture of the shaft wall, the exact quality of the darkness he was leaping toward. He flew into the other shaft with only centimeters to spare.

Immediately he saw the service turbolift several stories above. He wouldn't be able to use it to grab onto. It was stopped. It didn't surprise him; he doubted there would be med droids moving between the floors at this quiet hour. But on the other wall of the shaft he saw a power line cable bolted into the wall. Bolts big enough for handholds.

He felt the surge of the Force guiding him, and it was an infinitely easy matter to fly across the space, grab the bolts, and plaster himself against the wall. Ferus let out a breath. He'd made it. Sort of.

He made his way up the shaft using the Force and his liquid cable line. He calculated the floor he needed and found the door. It would be a squeeze, but he could make it.

He was able to activate the turbolift sensor on the outside to open the door. That was lucky. He didn't want to use his lightsaber if he didn't have to. He didn't want to leave any evidence of a Jedi break-in. He needed to be able to return to his life as a double agent.

Ferus stepped inside into a darkened room. He could feel the dark side of the Force suddenly surge. He had landed in a med droid recharging station. A line of tripod med droids were lined up in inactive mode. Ferus walked past them toward an archway. Beyond it was a corridor that led toward the interior of the round tower.

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Immediately his senses were on alert. There was activity here. Something was happening. Ferus let the noises drop away one by one. The hum of the air units and machinery, the slight buzz of the light tubes overhead. Somewhere he heard the clack of a droid making rounds, but it was several corridors away.

The Living Force was here, too.

Voices.

He crept forward. A door ahead had a small surveillance window. He risked a peek.

A blond human female in a luxurious cloak stood blocking his gaze into the room. Jenna Zan Arbor. What was she up to? He wasn't surprised to see her. He knew she was working for the Empire now. He'd seen her name copied on secret documents for a large-scale weapons delivery system. During the Republic, she had been a most-wanted criminal. She had introduced terrible viruses into populations and then offered her own vaccines to cure them. She'd made a fortune. During Ferus's very last mission, he had seen her trying to contact a Sith Lord on Korriban, the seat of Sith power. No, he wasn't surprised she was enmeshed with the Empire. It attracted beings like her.

He sidled around, trying to see who she was talking to. Someone was sitting on an examining table while she entered data on her medboard.

He was here to investigate Darth Vader, not track down Zan Arbor's next evil experiment. He should keep going. The chrono was ticking off the minutes. He had no way of knowing if this place would come alive with morning. And until then, anything could happen—Jako could wake up, a request for med info could come in, a random patrol could snag him. He needed to keep going. He couldn't save every being. He had to choose his battles.

Ferus turned away from the door, sensing only the presence of the dark side of the Force.

Chapter Seventeen

Trever kicked his pillow across the room. He knew it was childish and didn't help anything. But it felt good.

He was locked in.

He had failed.

He had no doubt that from now on he would be separated from Lune. They wouldn't leave them alone together again. And they'd make sure security was tighter than before. Maybe they'd be sent to the Mining Corps. Or, even worse, they'd be here so long that they'd turn into little Imperials and march out of here in those little caps and forget their hearts and brains.

He kicked the pillow again. This was some new moon night. He didn't know how he'd ever face Astri and the others.

Soon Maggis would come for him. He'd be done with Lune. Then it would be Trever's turn.

Trever couldn't sit around and wait. He had to get out of here. Tonight. He had to find Lune. If he waited, they would never escape.

He had his last resort hidden in his utility belt. Several sweet alpha half-charges. Not enough to blast open a hangar door, but it would do for the small door to his quarters. It would blow his cover as well as his door, but he couldn't worry about that now.

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He carefully set one charge on the door. He placed his pillow over it and then one of the extra pillows he had never given back, but hidden under his sleep couch. They would muffle the sound somewhat.

He picked up the cushions from his sleep couch and used them as a wall to protect him. In these small quarters the blowback could be tricky.

The charge went off. Trever felt the explosion and was catapulted back against the wall. He peeked over the cushion. The door had been blown off its hinges. All he had to do was give it a little push in order to get out.

Leaping over the blackened fabric of the pillows and the multitude of feathers, he slammed through the door. It fell with a thud, and he ran.

He'd try the hangar first. He didn't know where else to go. Maybe Maggis would still be there with Lune.

He made his way there, racing through the dark halls, ducking into empty rooms when he heard the *click-clack* of stormtrooper boots. If they weren't in the hangar he'd search the entire place for Lune.

To Trever's surprise, the hangar door was still open. Maggis sat slumped in a chair, his eyes closed, his head resting against the wall.

Trever stopped in the doorway, unsure of what to do. What had Maggis done with Lune?

Maggis opened his eyes, saw him, then closed them again. "Do you know what I was before this?"

Surprised at the question, Trever's answer was close to a squeak. "No."

"A professor of navigation and sublight technology. At the Celestial School of Spaceflight Engineering on Argus. Ever heard of it? Well, it's gone now. They closed it. And offered me this job. I thought, sure. How bad could it be?"

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Maggis opened his eyes and looked at Trever. He looked puffy and defeated. "I'm just not in the Empire swing of things, I guess. It takes its toll."

"Oh."

"Do you know what they do to you if you quit? Happened to someone here. You're told you'll never teach again. You're blacklisted from every academy in the galaxy. Et cetera. It's the thing they do when you cross them. They lean on you until there's no breath left in your lungs. Until you have no bone or muscle left. You turn into a dry leaf. And then they just want you to..." he puffed out his lips and blew. "Disappear. You might as well be dead." Maggis looked around the hangar. "I liked teaching once. Oh, well."

"I'm sorry."

Trever's words seemed to wrench Maggis's attention back to him.

"Why are you here? Trying to escape again? This place more than you bargained for?"

Trever was bewildered. He didn't know whether Maggis would suddenly turn on him. "Where's Lune?"

Maggis gave him a shrewd glance. "Why do you care? You just met him today."

Trever shrugged. "I got him in trouble."

"If you say so. Well, his daddy came for him."

"Bog?"

Maggis lifted a shaggy eyebrow. "How do you know who his father is?"

"He told me."

"If you say so. Well, his daddy is an Imperial governor, so he can do what he wants. He got Lune on some special volunteer list. Big Imperial project."

"What kind of project?"

"My, my, aren't we inquisitive? Wish I could see some of this intellectual curiosity in the classroom." Maggis shook his head. "It's on a need-to-know basis, and I'm just not one of the know-

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it-alls. All appearances to the contrary.” He gave a laugh that had only sadness in it. “Hey, but let’s talk about you. What did you really hope to accomplish? Did you really think you could steal a ship?”

Trever hesitated. This was a different Maggis. Trever didn’t know anything about the Living Force, but he could tell that something in Maggis had changed. Or else this could be a trick. “We were just fooling around.”

“I told you already, no more ‘we-were-justs.’ You’re not some kid with Imperial stars in your eyes, are you? I knew something about you didn’t fit,” Maggis said, but he said it absently, as if he were really thinking of something else.

He looked around the hangar. Then he put his hands on his knees and took a breath.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Trever asked. He was prepared to run. He could outrun Maggis, unless Maggis had a stun blaster. Which he probably did.

“Anywhere but here, kid. I’m your ticket out, Fortin. Or whatever your name is.” Maggis crooked a finger at a transport. “That one?”

Was it a trick?

“Hurry up before I change my mind. You caught me on a good night. I’m sick of the Empire, and I’m sick of this hat.” Maggis tossed his officer’s cap across the hangar.

He had to take the chance. Trever moved forward. He didn’t quite believe this was happening. He started up the ramp to the cockpit.

Kestrel’s voice suddenly echoed across the hangar. “What’s this, an early morning class? Nobody told me.”

“Recruit Kestrel, how good of you to join us.” Maggis drawled the words.

Trever froze.

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Maggis jerked a shoulder toward Trever. "Recruit Fortin has decided to take a joyride on an official Imperial cruiser. Unofficially."

Kestrel took several brisk steps forward. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, he was fully dressed in his uniform. "Allow me to do the honors, sir. I'm Fortin's shadow. I'm responsible for his behavior. I have to tell you that his door has been blown off its hinges."

"Now *that's* determination," Maggis said. "You're obviously taking your job just as seriously, Kestrel. Who knew I had such dedicated recruits on my hands?"

Kestrel's hand was on his holster. "Allow me to take care of this, sir."

"Be my guest. For this offense, I'd say twenty-five degradations should do it. That should guarantee Fortin makes it to the Mining Corps by the end of the week, at the rate he's going."

Trever braced himself, ready to jump as Kestrel reached for his blaster. But before Kestrel could get it out of his belt, Maggis moved with surprising swiftness. He drew his own blaster and aimed it at Kestrel.

"I think I should tell you that this is a real one," he said in a friendly tone. "The sting is slightly more...unpleasant."

Kestrel's neck flushed. "I don't believe you."

Blasterfire streaked across the hangar and blew up a service console.

Maggis backed up the ramp, still holding the blaster on Kestrel. "Get inside," he told Trever. "Start up the engines."

"What are you doing, sir?" Kestrel was incredulous.

"It appears, Recruit Kestrel, that my brilliant but short Imperial career is at an end. Enjoy."

Suddenly Kestrel streaked toward the security panel. He hit the sensor, and the alarms sounded.

Maggis could move fast when he had to. He leaped into the cockpit, jumped into the pilot seat, and grabbed the controls.

Jude Watson

He activated the retractable canopy, but it stopped halfway, shut down by the security system. He quickly overrode the system with a code and it began to close again. “Here’s where I get to prove I can actually fly,” he said to Trever.

Angling the craft sideways, he cleared the canopy by millimeters as it slid shut, clipping the ship and sending it in a spiral that Maggis corrected by flying upside down. Then they shot out into the lights of the Coruscant night.

Chapter Eighteen

Ferus passed room after room of equipment and diagnostics, but no record consoles. Sweat beaded his hairline. He felt it break out on his legs and arms and trickle down his back. Was there something in the air-filtering system that was making him dizzy? A lack of oxygen? There was something about this feeling that felt familiar.

Korriban.

He had felt like this on Korriban. When along with the Padawans and their Masters they had gone into the great valley of the Sith, into their very tombs. That radiating energy had caused them to feel dizzy and sick.

He paused. He must be near Sith artifacts. Maybe a Holocron. That would explain it.

Well, he had conquered the feeling then, as a boy of sixteen. He could do it again. He just had to keep going.

Then the voices began.

You know now where your path lies.

It lies with us.

A shift happened, as though a new sensor had clicked on inside his body. His head cleared. Suddenly everything went sharp and bright. He felt the call, and it lured him, as if a string

Jude Watson

had been tied to his breastbone and tugged. Tugging him toward the source. Power lay there. Why was he resisting it?

This is what Emperor Palpatine was trying to tell him. Exploring the dark side of the Force wasn't dangerous. It was natural.

Go to the source of the power. You will see then what you can do. More than you ever thought possible.

He moved forward. Ahead of him was an open door. Identical to all the others, brushed durasteel, but he could feel the pull. He slid up against the wall next to the opening and peered inside the chamber. It was several stories high, and this was the top, where a catwalk ran around the circular space. Along the walls, ancient weapons were stored in cases. Ferus didn't recognize them, but he did recognize their powerful aura of doom. He took a few steps forward onto the catwalk and looked down.

Below, ten stories down, he saw the top of Darth Vader's helmet. He stood in the center of the open chamber, his back to Ferus, intent on what was in his open palm. A Holocron.

A Sith Holocron. Vader held it in his gloved hands, as if gaining power from it.

Ferus felt a powerful urge. With the Holocron in the room, would he be able to draw power from it and engage his enemy? His hatred for Vader surged and joined with the waves of the dark side of the Force. He felt it pulse through his body. He remembered how he had destroyed the room at the garrison simply by joining his anger to the Force. He could fight Vader. At this moment he felt powerful enough to bring the whole tower down with him. He could come at him from above.

He would have vengeance for Roan.

And it would be sweet.

A tiny voice ordered him to step back. He tried to ignore it. There was still a voice there, a voice of a Jedi—of Siri, of Obi-Wan, his own younger voice—that told him the dark path was the path of madness and no return and he must resist. He wanted

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to stamp on that voice, grind it under his boot. Instead, it grew. He couldn't hear and couldn't breathe. He stepped back and pressed himself against the wall.

His last memory of Roan rose in his mind. The memory that gave him so much pain. He thought of the look in Roan's eyes. Roan had said good-bye, but also...*do not let this corrupt you.*

Roan had always known him better than he knew himself.

He eased away. He still felt shaky. He had to understand that the dark side of the Force would find the arrogance that lay dormant in him and inflame it. He wasn't ready to confront Vader. He was coming close to an edge he couldn't even see.

He mustn't be deflected. He still felt instinctively that the key to defeating Vader was in discovering his true identity. Ferus hurried down the hall and turned the corner. There had to be a central console for the droids to access. The time to find it was now, before...before he made a mistake. There was danger here, and it wasn't from prowler droids and stormtroopers.

He found it, at last, outside the entrance to the operating suites. A medical diagnostic station. Ferus could use his EmPal access code to start, then see what kind of security walls he ran into.

He quickly found the records. They were coded, of course, but this wasn't the impenetrable code of Darth Vader. It was no doubt an encryption that had been done by an Imperial coder, installed when the system had been set up, and used by a records droid who inputted the password each time it accessed the system. Which meant if Ferus could find the string, he could break the code.

He slipped a device out of his belt and into the drive. Strictly illegal, but it had its uses.

Within seconds, he had found several likely strings of code. They were frequently entered so any one could be a password. He inputted them one after the other. By the tenth, he had the password. Lucky. He was in.

Jude Watson

Ferus quickly searched back to the end of the Clone Wars, when the first reports of Darth Vader had surfaced. It was shortly after the Emperor seized full power.

There were constant shipment orders before that time. The Emperor had been creating this secret surgical center for months. There were no patients, however. Down in the EmPal that everyone knew about, there was a constant stream of the wealthy and powerful. But up here, there didn't seem to be any. This was such an exclusive club that there weren't any members. Had it been set up just for Palpatine's needs alone? Or were records expunged as soon as the patient was treated?

How about equipment? Ferus's fingers flew over the keys. Bacta shipments, totally normal. Full body scanners. He ran through various medical devices. He recognized some, but not others. He wasn't a medical mastermind. He'd have to commit them to memory and then run them by Amie Antin.

He thought again of Zan Arbor and the patient he'd seen. Well, he hadn't seen the patient. Zan Arbor had blocked whoever it was.

Ferus's fingers stopped moving. He thought back to the glimpse he'd had inside that room.

She'd blocked whoever it was. He couldn't see anything, just a corner of a tunic.

It had been a child. Zan Arbor couldn't have blocked a human adult. And Malory had told him that no other species were allowed at EmPal.

A child.

Ferus looked at the screen. The information was there. All he needed was time. He could keep digging, find more information, and piece by piece, he could have a picture of what this place was and if Darth Vader had been treated here.

Yes, there was his vengeance. But now there was this child. A child he didn't know.

Roan, what should I do?

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There was no answer, because Roan was dead. He would never hear his voice again.

He turned away from the console. He wrenched his attention away from the letters and numbers on the screen. He powered it down. The ghost images blinked off.

He left the room.

He was confused. What was he? Not quite a Jedi. Could he somehow progress to the full power of a Jedi Knight without the structure of the Temple and the wisdom of the Council? Could he do it on his own?

Didn't he *need* the lessons the Emperor could give?

He was strong enough to resist the pull of evil. He could still access the best part of himself.

He was still a person who would be moved by the fate of a child.

He retraced his steps to the examining room where he'd seen Zan Arbor. It hadn't been more than ten minutes since he'd seen her.

He sidled up to the door. He took the same glimpse inside.

This time he saw the child.

Lune.

Relief poured through him. To think he could have turned away! He had come so close to making the wrong choice. He would have turned his back on Astri's son.

Was this what the dark side of the Force would do to him?

Another med technician entered, a human woman. Ferus experienced a shock when he realized he'd met her before. It was Linna Naltree, the sad-eyed scientist who'd been recruited to work on Ussa. What was she doing here? Had she joined Zan Arbor in her terrible work by choice? Impossible.

She crossed to Lune and laid a hand on his shoulder. Her fingers squeezed gently in reassurance. Anger crossed her face as she looked over at Zan Arbor.

This could be his way out. Linna would help them.

Jude Watson

If Zan Arbor didn't leave the room, he'd have to go in with his lightsaber. He'd rather avoid that. He needed as much lead time as he could get. Darth Vader was on the premises. If he thought about it too long, he'd realize he didn't stand a chance.

He was in danger from the Sith Holocron, but the Force was still here. He had to trust it. It was here, it was everywhere, even in the midst of evil. He could pull it from the air, and it could protect him and feed him. He had to remember the feeling that had led him here, to a child he thought he didn't know. That feeling was what connected him to the Living Force.

He concentrated on Zan Arbor. He sent the Force toward her, hoping that he could affect her mind. He'd never been particularly good at it as a Padawan. He had been too rigid, Siri had told him. Too set in his own mind patterns to influence anyone else.

Well, he was no longer rigid.

Go and double-check everything. Can't make a mistake. Go over the material in solitude. In solitude.

He sent the thought toward her and waited the split second that seemed like an eternity.

She shook her head slightly, then left the room by the other door.

Ferus didn't hesitate. He burst in. Linna looked up, startled. Lune smiled.

"I knew you'd come," he said.

"I don't want to get you in trouble," Ferus said to Linna. "But I'm taking Lune out of here."

"You're taking me, too," Linna said. "I can't stay here anymore. That woman is monstrous."

It was more than he'd bargained for, but she'd smuggled Trever out from under the Imperial troops. He owed her. "All right. Hurry." They exited the room and ran down the corridor. "Where did you come in?" Ferus asked.

"A landing stage," Lune said. "Bog brought me."

"How did you get up to this level? A turbolift?" Lune nodded.

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A turbolift that wasn't on the blueprints. He'd guessed there must be one. "Can you find it again?"

"I think so."

"Were there any vehicles when you came inside the complex? Airspeeders? Ambulances?"

"Bog had an airspeeder, but he left."

"I came with Zan Arbor," Linna said. "There's a small hangar off the landing stage. One standard-issue small ambulance—a medspeeder. You can load one patient in the back."

"Okay, we're going to have to try that. Lead the way, Lune."

Lune led them through the maze of dark corridors and down several ramps. He didn't hesitate once. Finally they reached the turbolift. Ferus waved his hand over the sensor, hoping it wasn't coded. He saw the indicator light flash.

"Good," he murmured.

They watched the sensor indicate that the turbolift was ascending toward them. Then suddenly the light shifted to red and began to blink. The turbolift suddenly shut down.

Ferus's heart sank. It had to be a security alert.

"They know Lune is missing," Ferus said. "We have to go my way."

Ferus's mind worked quickly as he led them down to the droid recharging station. So far it wouldn't be a full-scale alert. Lune was missing, but they wouldn't assume he'd been taken by someone from the outside...not yet. They might assume that Linna had taken him for another test...or that he had run away, and she was looking for him. They wouldn't assume the worst. They had a few minutes. But no doubt prowler droids would be sent out to look for them.

Just as he had the thought, he saw the droid. Ferus wondered if it had blast capability as he unclipped his lightsaber.

Blasterfire streaked toward them. He deflected it and sent it back. The prowler droid went down, smoking.

"We'd better hurry. There'll be more."

Jude Watson

He led the others to the glass-walled gallery that ran around the tower. It was deserted. Outside it was still dark. Travel in the sky lanes was still light in the predawn hour, just a sprinkling of colored lights moving through the illumination cast by millions of glowlights on the elevated walkways and canyons of commerce. Ferus looked down at the tower itself, trying to reconcile the blueprints he'd studied with his own impressions.

Linna looked down, too. "It's a free fall down to the landing stage," she said. "How can we get down there?"

"Let me worry about that." He *was* worried. With his Force-ability, Lune could probably make it. But what about Linna?

Suddenly he felt a warning. Ferus reacted quickly, pulling Linna and Lune down just as blasterfire ricocheted through the gallery.

Five prowler droids winged toward him in star formation, firing rapidly as their photoreceptors detected Lune and Linna. The air was full of smoke. Ferus triple-somersaulted through the air. His lightsaber arced and danced as he swung, deflecting the fire and sending all five droids crashing to the floor.

Ferus was so attuned to the Force now that he could sense the air displacements outside in the corridor. More prowler droids were approaching. He had no doubt that Vader would be next. Thousands of meters in the air, they were trapped.

The only way was straight out, then down.

Ferus felt something strange, a humming in his bones that spread suddenly throughout his chest, like a burning star. Power. It seemed something apart from him, something he could reach out and tap if he wanted. This wasn't the fluidity of the Force, it was something different in quality. The dark side of the Force that could be grasped in a fist and used.

If he wanted.

And he heard the voices again, but this time they weren't outside of him. They were inside, at the heart of the humming inside him. Ferus turned and looked at the transparisteel. Any moment he expected to see a flock of droids approaching.

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You can save them.

All you have to do...is this.

The transparisteel window exploded inward, showering the corridor with jagged remnants of what had been solid a moment before.

“Ferus?”

Lune wasn’t practiced in the Force, but he felt enough to be afraid.

Ferus saw his reflection in the shattered glass. His eyes, glowing. His lip, curled. His face, dark with anger. He didn’t recognize himself.

Not understanding, Linna touched his arm. He looked at her hand and wanted to rip it off his body. He didn’t want connection.

“You can’t make it with me,” Linna said. “And you have to save Lune.”

Stupid woman, choosing to stay when I can save you!

Whose thought was that? His?

What is happening to me?

The voices...

“Go,” Linna urged. “They don’t know I was with you yet. I can go back. Remember you have a friend here.”

She turned and ran, jumping over the shards of transparisteel and disappearing.

Ferus hadn’t expected that. He stared at the empty air where Linna had stood. She had wanted so badly to escape. Yet she’d gone back to them.

Sacrifice had no place in a Sith’s galaxy.

Where did he want to live? With beings like Linna, or like Vader?

He felt the dark side drop away.

Ferus looked over the side, down thousands of meters to the narrow shelf of the landing stage.

He looked at Lune. “Trust your feelings. Remember?”

“Don’t think,” Lune said. “Just do.”

Jude Watson

“I promise you,” Ferus said, “we can do this.”

Ferus clipped a line from his belt to Lune’s. Then, calling on the Force, he didn’t think, didn’t hesitate, didn’t wonder. He leaped.

Chapter Nineteen

The Imperial starship screamed through the night sky, zooming between buildings and underneath skywalks. Apparently Maggis did not believe in skylanes.

As they barely cleared a high-rise, Trever cleared his throat. “Uh, do you think we should slow down?”

“I just got my freedom back, kid. Let me enjoy it.” Despite his words, Maggis pulled back on the speed. “Where to?” he asked.

“I need to find Lune. And I think you know more than you’re telling me.”

Maggis didn’t answer. He zoomed into a skytunnel.

“I can help you,” Trever said. “I know people here on Coruscant. They can give you new ID docs. Concoct a fake background. You could even teach again. They know how to bury you so deep the Empire could never find you.”

Maggis chewed on his lower lip. They emerged out of the skytunnel into the warehouse district. Maggis zoomed around a loading dock, then made an abrupt turn and flew under it, reversing his direction.

“I think I know where he is,” Maggis said. “I won’t rescue him. I’m no hero. But I’ll fly you there.”

They flew through the skylanes. Soon it was apparent to Trever that they were heading back to the Senate district. They

Jude Watson

circled over the Senate complex and headed toward a tall tower with an oval bulb-like crown on top of it.

“EmPal,” Maggis said. “One of the Emperor’s pet projects.”

“A med facility? Why did Bog take Lune there?”

“Like I said, he volunteered him,” Maggis said with a sneer. “His *boy*.”

Trever peered at it as they flew closer. Something caught his eye, a reflection. Something was weird. He grabbed for a pair of macrobinoculars.

“The transparisteel...” he muttered. “It’s shattered.”

“Nothing to do with me. I’ll put you down near the emergency entrance.”

Then Trever saw something unexpected. A boy falling out of the sky.

Maggis turned the starship, and Trever flipped over on the seat and strained to focus his macrobinoculars.

“Slow down! It’s Lune! He’s falling!” Another body floated into the macrobinocular scope. Trever slowly realized the man was tethered to Lune, and it was Ferus.

“We’ve got to help them!”

Maggis twisted to look at him. “I said I was no hero!”

Blasterfire streaked out of the tower. And then...Trever gulped. Was that *cannonfire*?

“Great novas—that’s a laser cannon!” Maggis roared, turning the ship.

“Get down there—they’re falling toward the landing stage!”

“Are you crazy?”

“They won’t fire on you! You’re in an Imperial ship!”

“I kinda don’t want to take that chance, kid!”

Trever threw himself over at Maggis and pushed the controls. The ship dipped.

“All right, all right!” Maggis’s jaw set.

Maggis flew the ship down, zigzagging all the way and flying at top speed.

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Trever pressed his face against the windscreen, trying to keep Ferus in sight. His only hope was if Ferus saw them. And recognized that despite appearances, they weren't the enemy.

Time seemed leisurely to Ferus. Amazing he could feel so calm while hurtling down thousands of meters. Trust flowed between him and Lune. In the midst of the rushing stars and air, Ferus felt a strange exhilaration. He was at the center of himself now, in tune with the complex Living Force that throbbed in the millions of beating hearts in Galactic City. And he wasn't afraid.

The platform below rushed toward him. He sighted on the sensor spike he'd seen from above. He reached for his laser line. He unfurled it, watched it snake through the black night and wrap around the sensor spike. The line went taut, and he and Lune bounced wildly. The line held.

The spike had broken his fall, and now all they had to do was make an easy Force-leap of a hundred meters or so, down to the landing stage. Then a quick dash into the hangar, and...

The stormtroopers poured out on the landing stage. They were equipped with light missile launchers.

And they were hanging here, perfect target practice.

Ferus began to swing. His only hope now was to swing them up to the sensor spike, and somehow crawl back to the tower itself. Except there was no way into the building that he could see.

The first blast missed them by centimeters. Lune cried out.

"Swing!" Ferus ordered, and Lune began to swing his legs, trying to create the momentum to get them away from the targeting computers.

Great. Now an Imperial starship was heading toward them. Something small and fast. Probably equipped with laser cannons. Someone was already trying to do a visual sighting. He could just make out a shadow at the windscreen.

If he could manage to reach the alpha charge in his utility belt...

Jude Watson

"Turn on the cockpit lights!" Trever yelled.

"What for? So those troopers can aim straight at our heads?"

"Just do it! It'll be okay."

Cursing, Maggis switched on the cockpit lights. Trever pressed himself against the windscreen as Ferus did a slow turn.

Ferus smiled. He'd recognized Trever.

"Okay, you can switch them off. Now open the cockpit canopy and get underneath them."

"Are you nuts? They can't just drop in! The speed ratio is too fast. They can't judge it. They'll miss!"

"He can do it. Trust me."

Maggis brought the starship in line. "I'm just doing one pass, just one. Then I'm outta here."

He turned the ship and zigzagged his way toward Ferus and Lune. A missile streaked toward the pair, and Ferus somehow managed to get out of the way.

A second later, Maggis zoomed underneath them. With split-second timing, Ferus directed Lune to climb on his back and released the laser line.

The two fell through space, straight down. Ferus guided them into the opening and they landed in the cockpit with a jolt that sent the starship lurching. They sprawled on the floor.

"Holy moon!" Maggis blustered. He pushed the engines forward, and they shot away, cannonfire streaking behind them.

Ferus lay half-sprawled on the floor, his arm securely around Lune. Trever stared at them, wild-eyed. He couldn't believe it had all worked.

"I don't know how you did it," Ferus said, looking around at the Imperial ship, "but thanks." He looked over at Maggis, in his Imperial officer's uniform. "And thanks to you, too, whoever you are."

"That's whoever-you-are, *sir*," Maggis corrected, wiping the sweat off his face.

Chapter Twenty

Once Lune was returned to his mother in a safe house in Galactic City, she did not let him out of her sight for twenty-four hours. Then Dex gently suggested that Lune might need some time to play, and she let him go off to play laser tag with a group of kids who lived on Thugger's Alley.

Dex had sent Maggis on to another safe house, where he promised they would set him up with a new identity. Flame and Wil had arrived from Bellassa, and Clive had joined them as well. It was time to plan the first Moonstrike meeting. It would have to be done in a place of complete safety.

"Well, now, you can meet here, I suppose," Dex said. "But..."

Flame was already shaking her head. "I don't think anyone would agree. No one wants to meet right under the Emperor's nose."

Keets and Curran Caladian both started to speak at once, coming up with different suggestions. Clive watched as Astri faded out of the room. He followed.

"Are you going to join Moonstrike?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't really have a homeworld. I lived all over with Didi when I was a girl. Then we settled here in Galactic City. But technically I'm not part of the resistance."

Jude Watson

"This could be a place to begin," Clive said.

"Ry-Gaul has offered to train Lune," she said. "The Jedi think he can develop his Force-ability. He'll never be a Jedi, but he could be...something. I owe him that. I guess I can't run from his Force-ability any longer. So we'll stay here for the time being."

"Maybe I have a job for you," Clive said. "There's something I need to do." He nodded in the direction of the conference. "We're placing a lot of trust in Flame. She's passed enough tests, it's true. But..."

"But what?"

"I don't trust her."

"So? You don't trust anybody."

"I went to Acherin to look into her background. I might have stumbled on her real identity. I thought I found somebody who might know something, but he was killed before I got a chance to talk to him. That bothers me."

Astri frowned. "Isn't Acherin in the middle of a civil war?"

"Yeah."

"With people getting killed every day?"

"Well, okay. Maybe it looks right. It just doesn't smell right. Flame escaped an Imperial prison with five others. All of them are either dead or back in prison. There's no way to trace what that operative might have known. And all the records on Acherin are gone. There's no way to trace who Flame really is. That bugs me."

"You realize that if you start digging, you might do more harm than good. Might stir something up that the Empire can use. And that could be the end of Moonstrike."

"Yeah, that's occurred to me." Clive hesitated. "You know, you were wrong before. It isn't true that I don't trust anybody. I trust Ferus. And you. I need help."

"Hmm, Clive Flax is asking for help. Never thought I'd see the day." Astri sighed. "All right. I guess I could use a distraction."

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It wasn't exactly a rousing show of support, Clive thought, but it was a start.

Ferus was due at the Imperial landing platform. But first there was someone he needed to contact.

Obi-Wan appeared in holo-mode in only seconds. His beard was streaked with more silver, and deep lines etched his cheeks. "I haven't heard from you in awhile," he said.

"You don't look so good," Ferus said.

"Charming as ever," Obi-Wan said. "I could say the same. What's going on?"

"Roan is dead."

The spasm on Obi-Wan's face told him how deeply the news had struck him.

"How?"

"Vader."

Obi-Wan looked off. Ferus tried to imagine what he saw. The dirt and rocks of Tatooine. The dust of his exile.

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said.

"And a Jedi has surfaced," Ferus said. "Someone you know. Ry-Gaul."

The sorrow on Obi-Wan's face eased. "I'm glad to hear that news."

"I'm gaining more trust within the Empire," Ferus went on. "I've been given a special assignment from Palpatine. Find any Force-adepts."

"A special assignment? I don't like the sound of that. You can't underestimate Palpatine. He is vastly more powerful than you. So is Vader. Together they're..."

"Unbeatable?"

"For you alone, yes."

"I know that," Ferus said. "But there are still things I can do. I've met someone, a contact who is trying to organize a resistance, planet to planet—"

"It's too soon," Obi-Wan said abruptly.

Jude Watson

"Your considered opinion," Ferus said, "as a hermit living in the Outer Rim?"

"I may be in exile, but I know the Empire," Obi-Wan said sharply. "Resistance must be built slowly. The Empire has a lock on power right now. It's been able to move from system to system and its communication network is already in place."

"Imperials are not the only ones with power," Ferus countered. Obi-Wan was lecturing him again.

"Just keep your focus where it already is," he said. "Are there any true prospects for the Force-adepts?"

"A few," Ferus said. "I was given a list." He told Obi-Wan of the different subjects on it.

He thought Obi-Wan would focus on the bounty hunter or the teacher, just as he had, but Obi-Wan went very still.

"The baby on Alderaan."

"Didn't seem promising," Ferus said. "A railing gave way, someone didn't fall...sounds more like a coincidence than anything. Someone's attempt to curry favor higher up the line with the Imperials. There are informers in every city on every planet these days. Even on a planet like Alderaan. But every report gets followed up, so it made its way to me."

"You must file a report dismissing the sighting," Obi-Wan said. "But first you must go to Alderaan and seem to investigate it."

"I have more important things to do than chase down a false lead," Ferus said. "I have a couple of real leads to look into."

"No," Obi-Wan said. "This is the most important thing you must do."

Ferus wanted to tell Obi-Wan that he couldn't give him orders, but he didn't think that would stop him from issuing them.

"Is there anything else I should know?" he asked.

Obi-Wan frowned. "I'm telling you what you need to know. And that isn't everything."

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“You know,” Ferus said, exasperated, “this isn’t the Temple, I’m not a Padawan, and you aren’t the Jedi Council.”

A ghost of a grin crossed Obi-Wan’s face. “I know. But I’m all you’ve got.”

And then the smile faded, and across the billions of stars separating them, they touched each other’s grief. Ferus’s words conjured up the silence and hush of the Temple, the humming energy of the classrooms, the ring of boots on ancient stone, the laughter of the younglings. The Council chamber, all twelve Jedi Masters sitting in a circle, with their experience, their wisdom, and their strength. They felt the loss of it, fresh and keen as the day it had all been destroyed.

When Ferus spoke again, his voice was soft and measured.

“I’ll leave today,” he promised.

If Obi-Wan said it was important, he would trust that it was.

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

MASTER OF DECEPTION

BY JUDE WATSON

Disney

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P R E S S

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Chapter One

Bail Organa stood at the window and watched his daughter Leia run through the gardens. Every day she learned new skills and grew steadier on her feet. His wife, Breha, sat cross-legged on the grass, laughing as Leia picked flowers.

Bail found that he was holding his breath. He let it out slowly.

They had thought the incident was nothing. An accident averted, nothing more than that. Leia had been with one of her caregivers, Memily, who worked in the kitchen but also volunteered to help out with the children. They had gone to a park at the other end of the city of Aldera to play, somewhere Leia had never been before. The park ended in high sandstone bluffs that overlooked the sea. There were fences along the perimeter, cleverly designed in a latticework that looked like white branches but were actually durasteel.

Except one of the areas was weakened, and Memily had been about to lean against it to admire the view.

Bail still wasn't sure exactly what had happened. Memily had told him the story, still shaken from the experience. She'd sworn that Leia, who was not yet a year old, had suddenly twisted her head and thrown her laserball directly at the spot. The laserball had hit the fence, which had shook so hard that Memily had been warned of its instability.

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Perhaps Memily wouldn't have fallen. Perhaps the fence would have held. Perhaps Leia had just randomly thrown the laserball.

Recounting this, Memily had fixed Bail with her large dark eyes. She was a young woman from the country, still a bit cowed by the atmosphere at the royal palace. "It was like she *knew*, sir," she'd said. "Like she saw something before it happened. I saw it in her eyes. Then she smiled at me and...kept on playing."

Memily was completely trustworthy; everyone in Bail's palace was. All those who lived on the grounds were either family or were related to the family's most trusted allies. Memily was the daughter of an old friend. Bail knew that she would have never talked about the incident to anyone but him.

But somehow this tiny incident, this minuscule ripple in the middle of an ordinary day, had been reported to the Empire.

Someone had seen it, and someone had talked, and maybe that person had told the story at the spaceport, a place from which someone might have taken it back to Coruscant. Spies were everywhere now. The Empire paid handsomely for the merest scraps of information. So someone, at some point, had thought that the Empire might be interested in word of a child with amazing reflexes.

Imperial informers were now a part of life in the galaxy, Bail supposed, but he didn't believe there were any on Alderaan. The society here was too close-knit, and everyone was bitterly opposed to the new Imperial order. It was just bad luck that the news had gone so far...all the way to the Imperial Inquisitors.

Bad luck. Was that it? A Jedi wouldn't say so. A Jedi would say that the dark side of the Force now moved through the galaxy, tempting some, encouraging others to exercise their worst impulses.

The good news was that nobody knew that the child was Leia. There was just a report of a child, neither male nor female, and a caregiver who had quickly hustled her away. He couldn't fault Memily for that, but it had attracted attention.

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Bail glanced around the room, at the transparisteel doors that marched along one entire wall, so that the gardens would be seen in full display. Leia called this room the “inside-outside room.” The palace had always been an open place. That was the Alderaan way. Any citizen could come to the door and knock. Bail had security placed here during the Clone Wars, but it was minimal. Breha had fought him even about that. She would not change her planet’s traditions for the sake of a repellent regime, she said, her chin lifted in that way he knew so well.

She was right, actually. If the Empire wanted access to this place, they would get in no matter how much security he ordered.

Now two Imperial Inquisitors were due to arrive later that day. He had told Breha to take Leia away for the duration. He could see them now, heading toward the private gates the family used to enter and exit the official palace compound. Bail felt better knowing that Leia wouldn’t be at home.

Not that an Inquisitor would pick up anything strange. Leia was a normal toddler. Advanced for her age, yes, but he’d never seen any evidence of Force sensitivity in her. He had hoped, instead, that whatever she had inherited from her true parents had been all from Padmé. Her intelligence, her courage, perhaps some of her grace...not just her brown eyes.

Yet part of Anakin Skywalker was there, too. Bail had hoped it wouldn’t be. In this galaxy, ability with the Force would be a burden to his child, not a gift.

So much to hide, Bail thought. The Inquisitors would come, and they would walk the city, and they would comb through records, and they would invade the privacy of the citizens of Alderaan, and if Bail had anything to do about it, they would find nothing and leave. The report of a toddler with an amazing pitching arm would be tossed aside, as well it should, lost among the millions of tips the Imperial investigators received from those trying to curry favor, trying to move up in the system.

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Bail sighed. He would have to cooperate. But he wasn't about to make it easy.

Chapter Two

Ferus Olin resisted the urge to tug at the collar of his Inquisitor's robe. To him the robe was unnecessarily ominous-looking. The hoods were designed to conceal the face. He had remarked to his fellow Inquisitor, Hydra, that it seemed counter-productive to wear such a frightening costume if you were trying to coax information out of reluctant subjects, but Hydra had merely stared at him with her flat, expressionless gaze and said, "The Empire does not coax."

Right. He knew he should really pay attention to this new Imperial lingo. They didn't coax, they didn't ask, they didn't defer, they didn't take into account that anyone they came in contact with was in fact a living, breathing creature. Ruthless efficiency was the only way to go.

Ferus hated being a double agent. If the Emperor hadn't given him this particular job, he would have dropped away and gone back to the resistance. But given the chance to head up the Inquisitors who were tracking down rumors of Force-adepts, he couldn't turn it down. If he could locate them, he could save them. And if locating them took being an Inquisitor for awhile, he would do it.

But this robe...he'd been in two Imperial prisons so far and this robe felt like the third.

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If it hadn't been for Obi-Wan Kenobi, he wouldn't be on Alderaan at all. All that solitude was making Obi-Wan even more of a mystery man than usual. Obi-Wan had his secrets, and he was keeping them. That didn't stop him, however, from issuing edicts to Ferus every once in awhile. When Ferus had listed the Force-sensitive prospects, for some reason this nameless toddler on Alderaan had gotten Obi-Wan's attention.

Imperial Inquisitor Hydra sat beside him, her expression neutral. She never said a word if she didn't have to. Her hood shadowed her face, and it was rare that he caught a glimpse of her expression. She didn't seem to have an emotion about anything. They'd traveled together for two days now, and she had never complained about delays or bad food or the faulty engine light that had grounded them for five hours at a decrepit spaceport.

She piloted the airspeeder, zooming through the space lanes of Alderaan without regard to anyone else. The palace lay on a slight rise at the edge of the city, overlooking the vast lake. It was a gracious complex of buildings surrounded by gardens and orchards. Terraces on various levels afforded the inhabitants plenty of air and light in Alderaan's temperate climate. Hydra brought the airspeeder down, releasing the repulsorlift motor so that the airspeeder crushed a plot of clover.

Ferus gathered himself for the encounter. Bail Organa was a personal hero of his. He had followed Organa's career in the Senate, heard his speeches, read his writings. His passion for justice was never an occasion for ego or grandstanding; his quiet resolve was, for Ferus, the essence of what a politician should be and rarely was.

And Bail would despise him.

Not only was he entering his house as an enemy, but Bail no doubt knew his background. He would accept the official Imperial line that Ferus had been a great hero of the Bellassan resistance before seeing the error of his ways and joining the

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Empire. In other words, Bail would see him as a traitor to every ideal he held dear.

Ferus and Hydra approached the palace and walked through the gates. Ferus was surprised at the lack of security. It had to be there, but he sensed no hidden alarms or sensors. No weapons were allowed on Alderaan, but still, he would have expected some sort of protection for the Queen and her large extended family.

They followed a winding path through ancient trees with thick trunks of dark golden wood. The gardens were in bloom, and all the flowers were bursts of color against the dense dark greens of the foliage.

The path led them to a wide front door that was intricately carved from what looked like the massive trunk of one of the majestic trees that surrounded the palace. Bail Organa opened the door himself as they approached.

Ferus gave a slight bow.

“We come as designates of the Emperor,” he said.

“You may enter.”

Bail turned and walked stiffly back into his home. Every muscle in his body told them how little he thought of them and how quickly he wanted them gone.

Ferus glanced at Hydra, but as usual couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She walked swiftly, her hands concealed in her robes.

Bail led them to what must have been the palace’s most formal room, used for ceremonial affairs. It was paneled with wood and topped by a domed ceiling. Inside, two women waited. Ferus recognized Breha, tall and beautiful in her white gown of plain cloth. The other woman resembled her, but was taller, with a round, pretty face and coils of dark hair around her ears.

“My wife Breha, Queen of Alderaan, and my sister-in-law, Deara, advisor to the Queen,” Bail said shortly.

There was no furniture in the room, and they stood directly in the center just underneath a massive lighting fixture in the shape of a sun.

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“What has brought you to Alderaan?” Bail asked.

“It is the charge of the Imperial Inquisitors to promote stability in the galaxy.” Ferus trotted out the words he had been told to say before any request for information. He forged on despite the contempt evident in Bail’s expression. “In order to do this, the cooperation of Senators and rulers is expected. A report has been filed by one of your citizens—”

“One of our citizens, you say,” Breha said. “I don’t think so. Alderaan citizens do not spy on each other.”

Ferus wasn’t about to debate this. Breha was most likely right. But it infuriated Ferus that his level of security clearance did not extend to the names of Imperial operatives, even code names. He didn’t know who, exactly, had turned in the report of the unusual toddler.

“A report has been filed,” he repeated courteously, “that makes it necessary for us to pursue an investigation onsite. We would like your permission to search the official records of Alderaan, including security reports, domestic surveillance—”

“The royal court does not spy on its citizens!” Bail’s voice whipped out and echoed in the chamber.

“We leave that to you,” Deara added.

“—and any and all recorded communications and citizen registries,” Ferus finished. He kept his tone polite and respectful, but it did nothing to lessen Bail’s obvious rage.

They all knew the outcome. Bail and Breha would give permission because they had to. They knew very well that even asking for permission was just a symbolic gesture. The Emperor had given himself the power to open any planetary records that he wished. Ferus was sure that one day soon, even this meaningless exchange wouldn’t be necessary. For the present, the Emperor was still concerned with appearances.

Bail’s eyes burned through him. “You don’t need our permission,” he said, spitting out the words. “So why put us through the hypocrisy of asking for it? Do what you will. We have nothing to hide.”

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As one, Bail, Breha, and Deara turned their backs on the Inquisitors and walked out.

Chapter Three

As Ferus and Hydra climbed back into the airspeeder, Ferus said, "I think we should try the office of Official Records first."

"You were deferential to Bail Organa," Hydra replied, surprising him. "Why?"

"He's a Senator."

"He is the main opposition to the Emperor in the Senate. He works to destroy the Empire."

"It's easier if you avoid confrontation when you're digging on someone else's ground."

"That is a curious statement," Hydra said. "Alderaan belongs to the Empire. This is *our* ground."

Oops, Ferus thought. He had to be more careful. "I'm speaking of perception," he said. "If we push the Senator too hard, he may close access to us in ways we aren't even aware of. We don't have a lock on this planet...yet."

She didn't reply, and Ferus guided the airspeeder toward a cluster of official buildings in a central area of the city of Aldera. He'd have to dump Hydra somehow. She was too watchful. His job here was to investigate the report as fast as possible and then close the book on it. He didn't want her around. Obi-Wan seemed less interested in the possible presence of a Force-sensitive child than he was in getting the Inquisitors off the scent.

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If Ferus found the child, he'd be honor-bound to make sure he or she was protected. It could be tricky.

He was anxious to get free of Hydra and contact Amie Antin. She was a doctor and scientist, and he needed her expertise. Just days ago he'd broken into EmPal SuRecon and was able to steal some supply records. The Emperor's private medical facility had to have been the place where Darth Vader's suit had been constructed and fitted. No other place in the galaxy had that expertise. Ferus hoped that after Amie Antin analyzed the records, she'd be able to give him a clue to Vader's identity, or at least a place to start.

If his suspicions were correct, Darth Vader was a fallen Jedi. Not only that, Ferus had the nagging feeling that he'd known him. Perhaps even known him well.

If Ferus could discover the nature of Vader's injuries, he might discover who he'd been. That might give him an edge in a battle.

Because they were heading for a fight.

Vader had killed his partner Roan Lands in cold blood. He had done it just to infuriate Ferus. He had taken a life just for his own amusement.

He had to pay for that.

Ferus knew that by giving in to his rage he was jeopardizing his rediscovered grasp of the Force. He had never become a Jedi officially; he had resigned from the Order when he was still an apprentice. He knew his limitations. He wouldn't be much of a match for Vader as he was.

He had learned detachment as a Jedi Padawan, but he didn't feel detached. Not at all. A calm, steady fury was at the core of him now. It needed only a trigger to explode. He had been taught all his life that avenging a death was wrong. But this didn't feel wrong.

The Emperor had told him that he could teach Ferus about the dark side of the Force. He had told him that his anger would only make him stronger. Ferus had to admit he'd been right. You

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couldn't argue with results. The few times he'd tapped into his anger and felt the dark side of the Force, he'd been able to move objects at shocking velocities just by concentrating his rage.

Before he'd left Coruscant, he'd met briefly with the Emperor. Palpatine had given him a Sith Holocron, small enough to tuck into his tunic pocket. He'd told him that if he had the courage to access it he could gain great power.

He didn't tell him what he'd see. He didn't tell him what he'd learn. But the way he'd rasped the word *power*, the way he'd caressed the Holocron, had told Ferus everything. If he wanted to beat Vader, this was the only way.

He hadn't yet accessed the Holocron. He could feel it in his tunic, lending a weight out of proportion to its size. Sometimes it seemed to have warmth. Sometimes it was like an icy burn that penetrated the fabric of his clothes. Sometimes it seemed to affect him in odd ways. It felt as though the world was fracturing along invisible fault lines. There was a curious doubleness to his vision, as though he could see through things into their core underneath. Sometimes he felt a flash of contempt toward his fellow beings and their weakness.

Keeping it close felt dangerous enough.

Chapter Four

Trever Flume waved his hand over the sensor that turned the stairs into a ramp and slid down to the front door. He plugged in the exit code of Dex's hideout on Coruscant and headed out into Thugger's Alley. There was a meeting in progress, and though the topic was exciting—at last, the meeting of resistance leaders from planets all over the galaxy would take place—the talk was dull.

How could they organize a galactic resistance if they couldn't agree on the simplest thing: a place to meet?

Wil, the head of the already-legendary Eleven on Bellassa, had suggested a planet in the Outer Rim. But none of the resistance leaders thought that was a good idea. Too many checkpoints between here and there, although they would feel relatively safe once they arrived. Dex had suggested Coruscant, where he could provide security, but that suggestion was met with outrage. Put themselves right under the Emperor's nose? A good portion of the resistance leaders, the ones appearing in hologram form, had offered their homeworlds. They thought their networks were tight enough to guarantee safety, but only on their own planets. In other words, they didn't trust anyone else to provide security for them. Because they didn't yet trust each other.

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Whatever. All Trever knew was that the arguments bored him silly. It was almost as bad as sitting in the Senate galleries.

Trever exited from Thugger's Alley, knowing every step he had taken down the twisting byway had been monitored by Dex's security system. He walked through the seedy levels of the Orange District, used to them now. He hardly gave a look to the other denizens of the district, where even Imperial security forces hesitated to enter. If you lived here, you knew not to initiate eye contact.

No turbolifts or pedestrian transports worked here. If a project was begun to improve the lighting, or resurface the walkways, it would be sabotaged or mysteriously destroyed, no matter how much security was used to cordon it off. So getting out of the Orange District took some time. But time was something that Trever had plenty of. That group would keep blabbing forever. No one would even notice that he'd skipped out.

Trever was wanted on his homeworld of Bellassa, but here on Coruscant he felt oddly safer than anywhere else. He'd rather have a crush of beings to hide in. If he felt the need for air and light, he found his way to the surface and entered into the swiftly flowing currents of pedestrians in the Senate district. He felt invisible there.

And besides, before Ferus had left Coruscant, he'd given Trever a secret mission to do.

The crowds surged around him on the pedestrian walkway in the Senate district. Bright sunlight caused random flares to burst from the metallic detailing on the airspeeders flashing in the space lanes. Trever kept his eyes open for Imperial security, which sometimes initiated random ID checks.

He was often alone now. Astri's son, Lune Oddo, was on the secret asteroid base that Ferus had established. Lune had been in training with Ry-Gaul, but the silent Jedi had brought him to

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Garen Muln for more lessons. Even though Garen was frail now, he had a special, newfound gift for teaching. Garen had been one of the most daring Jedi pilots back when the Jedi were still around. Now he was in seclusion on the asteroid and had, he said, discovered new parts of himself, like patience.

Trever was surprised to find himself missing Lune. He'd never paid much attention to the kid until the eight-year-old had been kidnapped and forced to enroll in the new Imperial Naval Academy. Trever had enrolled in order to get him out, and he'd discovered that the little guy had full-moon smarts and nerves of durasteel. Not to mention that he was pretty good company. They'd spent a bit of time together before Ry-Gaul had whisked him off to the asteroid. Maybe it was the spooky Force-connection Lune had, but the kid definitely kept you on your toes.

Trever hopped on a moving ramp that brought him up another fifty levels in the crisscrossing levels and mid-levels of the district. As the ramp moved upward, a new perspective of the shimmering buildings appeared. His gaze rested on the ruined Jedi Temple, now directly in front of him.

He turned his head. He'd been inside the Temple with Ferus, early in their friendship. He'd hung onto that spire and followed Ferus inside. Even he, with no Force connection at all, had felt the power that still hummed inside those walls.

It hurt his eyes to see it now.

He'd heard the ruined Temple was now a site of ghoulish fascination to the elite of Coruscant. It was a place where so many Jedi had died. It was considered a mark of status if you'd been permitted to tour it. The whole idea disgusted him. He wouldn't tell Ferus. He knew how much it would upset him.

Just then, to his surprise, he caught sight of Flame above, moving through the crowds. As the ramp moved upward, he saw her turn onto another walkway. He leaped off the ramp and followed her.

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He caught up with her near the fountains on the edge of one of the many plazas surrounding the Senate building.

“Sightseeing?” he asked as he came up beside her.

She must have jumped a meter. “I didn’t see you,” she said. “Trevor, you gave me a fright. I’m always on the lookout for an Imperial ID check.”

“Sorry.” He leaned back against the fountain wall, feeling the spray against his neck. “What are you doing in these parts?”

“Is the meeting over?” she asked, running over his words. An anxious look was on her face. “They asked me to leave so they could debate more freely.”

“They’re still blabbing away.” Trevor shook his head. “You’d think a bunch of resistance fighters would have more nerve. Everyone’s afraid of being caught.”

“It’s a question of trust,” Flame said, looking at the play of sunlight on the fountain. Her green eyes narrowed. “Decisions like this take a cohesiveness that the group doesn’t have yet.”

“Cohesiveness?” Trevor snorted. “It takes guts. That’s all.”

“They’ve already proved their courage,” Flame chided gently. She frowned. “But I don’t like this. I’m afraid Moonstrike will fall apart. I had a meeting with Bail Organa. I was given an introduction to him by one of the resistance leaders, a former trusted associate of his. I asked him to join Moonstrike, and he refused. He said there was no resistance on Alderaan and that he was committed to working through the Senate. He must be lying,” she said, clasping her hands together. “There’s got to be an underground movement on that planet. What does Ferus say?”

“He only just got there. He didn’t say much.”

“Bail Organa is the key,” Flame said. “If only we had Senators in Moonstrike! That would lend it legitimacy. We could form a galaxy-wide movement for certain then, with a political arm and a military one. But if Bail Organa refuses, others will.” She turned to Trevor. “Do you think Ferus could convince him?”

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“Ferus is undercover,” Trever said. “Organa thinks he’s part of the Empire, remember?”

“Well, he’d have to reveal his identity as a double agent, of course,” Flame said. “But Bail Organa is trustworthy. We need him, Trever!”

“I’ll ask Ferus,” Trever said. He’d do just about anything for Flame. Rumor had it she’d sacrificed a pretty sweet life and a personal fortune to start the Moonstrike movement. Next to Ferus, he admired her more than anyone in the galaxy. “But all I can do is ask. You can’t make Ferus do something he doesn’t think is right. He’s really annoying that way.”

“Tell him how important it is,” Flame urged.

Trever nodded, noting how strained Flame seemed. She was usually so cool and collected, even under blaster-fire. He guessed it was because she was so close to her goal.

“I’m counting on you,” Flame said. She smiled and reached out to tug at the brim of the cap he wore to conceal his bluish hair. “As I always do.”

The affection of the gesture pleased him as much as the confidence in her eyes. “I won’t let you down,” he promised.

He continued on his way. He looked above and saw the tall Republica 500 tower ahead. Ferus had contacted him earlier that day and asked him to check out the security measures there.

Ferus still felt bad that when he’d broken into EmPal SuRecon he’d had to leave one of the scientists, Linna Naltree, behind. She’d willingly returned to continue as the barbaric scientist Jenna Zan Arbor’s assistant, in order to ensure that Lune and Ferus would be able to escape. Ferus owed her a debt, and he intended to get her out if he could. The first step was to see if she was staying at the Republica tower along with Zan Arbor, who had demanded an apartment in that most exclusive housing tower in the city.

They still didn’t know what Zan Arbor was working on, but they knew it involved Darth Vader. More investigation was needed. Linna might know by now what the secret project was. If

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they could get to her, they could discover what she knew and free her from Zan Arbor's grip. A little surveillance was the first step.

Trever stopped in an exclusive florist that he knew sold exotic blooms from all over the galaxy. He balked at the prices and finally chose the cheapest thing he could find, a small plant with vibrant yellow leaves native to the planet Huro. He asked them to wrap it extra carefully, with plenty of their signature lilac gemweb fabric and trailing rainbow ribbons. He got attitude from the clerk but he didn't care. He picked it up and headed for the plaza in front of the tower.

The elite of Coruscant swirled through the plaza, some striding forward quickly, as though they were on their way to a crucial appointment, others carefully balancing ridiculous coiffures and headdresses, walking in a slow, stately fashion so that others would notice them. Trever felt invisible as he moved through the crowd. No one noticed just another insignificant boy, one of the hundreds who ran errands and did the Senators' bidding. They were on the lowest rung of the Senate hierarchy. Trever had been sure to get hold of the brown caps they wore pulled down to their eyebrows. Under the brim, his gaze could study the front of the tower and see through the massive transparisteel doors into the lobby. Within only a few moments he'd scoped out the security.

Not completely, of course. He knew from being a street thief on Bellassa that there was security you saw and security you could only guess at. He would be able to make it into the lobby without trouble, thanks to his package. But he'd have to do some curvy tricks to get himself inside a turbolift.

Luckily, when it came to curvy tricks, he was an expert.

Ferus had only asked him to scope out the obvious and speculate on the rest. Ferus hadn't asked him to actually break into Zan Arbor's apartment.

But he was going to anyway.

Chapter Five

Ferus left the airspeeder with Hydra and took off his Inquisitor robe, stuffing it in his pack. He immediately felt better, lighter, and easier in his mind.

He struck out into the streets of Alderaan. Like a Jedi on a mission, he wanted his boots on the ground. Sometimes a simple walk through a city plaza could tell you more about the state of a planet than a full briefing.

Aldera was built on an island over a vast shallow lake. Most of the buildings were built from the same glowing white stone, with domes and towers thrusting up into a sky that seemed to arc like a delicate teacup overhead. The people of Aldera went about their business with pleasant expressions, hailing friends, slowing their steps to admire the day, stopping at a café. Unlike the other worlds he had visited, Alderaan didn't seem touched by the hand of the Empire.

And that worried him.

He didn't know if the Emperor had plans for Alderaan, but he sensed that the people here thought he would never dare to. They were protected by their Queen, by their Senator, and by their own peacefulness. Alderaan had banned weapons long ago, and its citizens had found a way to coexist without the strife and anger that split other societies.

Jude Watson

Ferus knew that sooner or later Palpatine would turn his eye on Alderaan. Bail was too powerful a figure to allow to remain so influential. It might take months or years, but it would happen.

Ferus felt his comlink signal buzz against his side. He saw that it was a coded message. Hoping it was Amie Antin, he drifted over to a small park tucked in between two buildings. The park was in shade and no one was sitting there. He stood and answered.

“I’m glad I could reach you. It’s Amie.”

“You have news for me?”

“I’ve gone over the information you forwarded to me from the break-in at EmPal. I haven’t found much. Except...during the time period you gave me there was an emergency shipment of a special strain of bacta that has been proven effective in cases of severe burns and regeneration of tissue. That would be standard equipment for any med center. Except...”

Amie’s voice faded out, and he couldn’t tell if it was the transmission or her hesitancy. “Except?” he prompted.

“Added to this emergency shipment was a trio of detoxification drugs and devices specifically designed to treat a being with heavy metal contamination. Which means that most likely a patient had been injured in either a mine explosion or, more likely, a volcanic eruption in which the lava held an unusually high concentration of metal allotropes....”

“Amie, I beg you. Get to the point.”

“So I researched mining planets and volcanic planets, but the database was just too large to pin down. So I went back to the supply list and found something I’d overlooked. Well, I hadn’t overlooked it, but it hadn’t seemed significant. One of the med agents ordered for the center had been ordered in a very small quantity, too little, really, to be logical if it was a standard order for outfitting a new care facility. This was a rush shipment of a very expensive medication, which only has one medical use: to neutralize an extremely rare but toxic heavy metal that is only found on two hundred and eleven planets...” Amie took a

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breath "...which I cross-checked for volcanic activity. The weird thing is that this allotrope can't survive in normal lava; the lava has to be a bit cooler. Say about eight hundred degrees."

"That sounds pretty hot to me."

"That's because you're not a volcano. So this particular allotrope stays liquid, which increases its toxicity. So then I cross-checked for volcanic eruptions in the last year of the Clone Wars, and amazingly enough, because this never happens, only forty-three planets met all the criteria."

Ferus sighed. Forty-three wasn't bad, but it wasn't close enough. It would take time to narrow down the list. "Thank you, Amie, you can send the—"

"Wait. I'm not finished. I took the list to Dex, and Oryon was there. Remember he was a master spy at the end of the Clone Wars? Well, he recognized one of the planets. Reports at the end of the Clone Wars cited it as a hideout for the Separatist Council. Mustafar. Look, I'm a scientist, so I don't like jumping to conclusions. All of this is speculative. But if I *had* to guess where this patient had been injured, I would bet on Mustafar."

"Mustafar. I've never heard of it."

"That's not surprising. Nobody in their right mind would go there. It's a remote planet in the Outer Rim. It has a gas-giant twin, Jestefad. It has unspeakable heat, rivers of boiling lava, and the volcanoes are in a continual phase of eruption. Your basic nightmare planet."

A perfect place for a Sith to be born, Ferus thought.

But what could he do with the information? He could hardly go tearing off to the Outer Rim. There was no telling if he'd find anything there, anyway. In his bones, he felt whatever information he needed to defeat Darth Vader lay here in the Core, in the everyday activities of the new Empire. In his own intuition.

In the Holocron.

Jude Watson

That voice...what was it? Not his own. It had sprang up in his mind, and the Holocron seemed to burn his chest in response. Ferus put his hand over it.

"There's one other thing," Amie said. "The Moonstrike meeting isn't going well."

Ferus felt a surge of annoyance. *Why was she bothering him with trivialities? Amie was foolish and naïve.*

That voice again...it wasn't his.

No, Amie was brave and resourceful. She'd been a doctor on her homeworld on Bellassa. She'd kept out of the Eleven as long as she could, but only so she could continue her work. She had a son back on Bellassa whom she pined for.

That makes her a weak link in the chain.

No. He would never consider Amie weak, or capable of betrayal.

Everyone is capable of betrayal. Everyone has a weak point.

Ferus dropped his hand from the Holocron. It felt as though it had burned him. The voice in his head was too insistent. Where did it come from?

It comes from you. It is your true voice that is speaking.

Agitated, Ferus reached out for the Force. He needed to fight the voice, and he couldn't do it alone.

He'd never had thoughts like that about Amie. They weren't true. She was a courageous, compassionate woman.

The Sith Holocron cooled against him.

He looked down at his fingers. They were reddened as if they'd been held to a flame.

"So if you could just consider it," Amie went on, "we would be grateful."

He had lost the thread of what she'd been saying. With difficulty, Ferus wrenched his attention back to her and replayed her words in his head. "The asteroid must remain a secret between all of us," he said. "If we expose it, we endanger any future Jedi I may find."

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“Ferus, I respect your mission, I do,” Amie said. “But so far, all we’ve found is that the Jedi who haven’t been eradicated have gone so deeply underground that they are impossible to find. And the resistance is starting here, now. We need your help.”

“I’ll consider it,” he said finally. “I can only promise you that.”

They ended the communication. Ferus looked at his burned fingertips. He felt shaken. It was the first time he felt that the Holocron had influenced his mind.

Was this just a taste of what could happen to him, with a Sith Holocron so near?

Ferus walked all the way to the northern outskirts of the city and reached the park. It was built over the lake that surrounded the city of Aldera and mimicked the grasslands that covered much of the planet. Ferus knew that there were thousands of varieties of grasses on Alderaan, and he could see that many of them were represented here. The grasses had been planted in swaths of undulating rows, each in a different color of green and blue and gold, and the colors seemed even more intense on this day of bright sunlight.

Children ran through the grasses or congregated on the soft sandy areas that were interspersed with the grass to provide space for play and picnics. Ferus made his way to the very edge of the park. There was a gradual slope upward and then a long flight of steps made from blocks of white stone. He climbed up to the vantage point above.

He now stood on a sandstone bluff overlooking the lake, which stretched to the horizon. To his left was the main spaceport of Alderaan, a busy place with constant traffic. He could see the glint of sunlight on the cruisers that were almost constantly landing and taking off. To his right was the expanse of blue lake.

Jude Watson

The railing had been designed to look like braided vines. He wandered along it until his gaze found what he was looking for. Despite the careful repair work, he could see where the railing was newly mended. If the woman in the report had fallen, she would have landed on the sandstone rocks below, and would have been seriously injured.

Ferus turned in a full circle to survey his surroundings. Although the smell of the grass and the water made it seem as though he was in the country, he was surrounded by the city. Here near the edge of the park the buildings appeared to be more industrial—warehouses and vertical hangars, most likely for the nearby spaceport.

Perhaps he wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been trained at the Temple. Perhaps it would have seemed just another flash from descending aircraft. Ferus rotated again, pretending to take in the view. Yes, that was it. The building to his right, the one closest to the park...someone was using electrobinoculars. He'd seen the flash of sunlight on the lenses.

Was someone spying on the park?

Ferus turned and began to walk at a leisurely pace back down the wide stairs, and then through the ornamental grass. Suddenly a toddler darted in front of him. Ferus stepped back.

"Sorry." A woman with warm eyes and a ready smile scooped up the toddler. "Tula, you've got to watch where you're going."

"I should have, as well," Ferus said. "This is a beautiful park."

"Your first time here?" She pushed her hair out of her eyes and smiled. "It's a great spot. It never gets too crowded because it's out of the way." Her toddler began to wriggle, and she gently set her down. "But tomorrow is when you should be here. The gingerbells are ready to bloom."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about flowers," Ferus said.

"You must not be from Alderaan, then."

"I'm a visitor."

She crouched and pointed to a small bud almost hidden in the grass. "There are thousands of these in the park. They're famous

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on Alderaan because they all bloom on the same day. The park is hosting a festival here. Everyone who knows the park will come. It's an amazing sight. They let the children pick all the blossoms." She straightened and began to run after her toddler. "You should come!" she called to Ferus over her shoulder.

Yes, he would come. It would be a perfect opportunity to observe the children.

What did Siri Tachi used to say? *"If you want to get lucky, open your eyes."* Ferus smiled, remembering his Master's brusque way of talking, her irreverence, her style. He still missed her.

Attachment—forbidden or...normal?

He walked along the far side of the park and crossed a wide boulevard to get close to the building he'd observed. It was some kind of warehouse, with a security system but no personnel. Ferus bypassed the standard security entry code with ease. It was a skill he'd learned in his old profession, the business he'd started with Roan. Although technically they operated on the right side of the law, it was occasionally helpful to push the line a bit.

Faced with a bank of turbolifts, he oriented himself quickly and chose one that reached the highest floors facing west. He zoomed upward. He had counted the floors from the ground and he guessed he'd seen the flash from the two hundred and seventh floor.

Ferus walked out cautiously. He reached for the Force, letting it tell him if there was any danger. He felt no vibrations, no clues as to what lay ahead. He didn't feel a trace of the Living Force. It felt to him as though the floor was deserted.

He moved cautiously toward the door he guessed would have the window he'd seen from below. He listened carefully at the door but heard nothing.

He bypassed the security code and entered.

The room was empty. Completely empty. Nothing had been stored here for some time. He could smell the dust. So why had it been locked? He walked to the window. The dust had been disturbed. Someone had cleared a clean space to look out.

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He looked down at the park. From here he could pick out the woman with the toddler who had talked to him. Now she was with a tall, thin man who picked up the toddler. The baby's father. They started to exit the park. Ferus swept the park with his gaze and the boulevard below. Everyone else seemed normal, too. No one was moving quickly or keeping underneath the underhangs. If there was anything suspicious, it wasn't evident from here.

He took out his own electrobinoculars and trained them below. From here you could see the fence clearly; he could even pick out the point of repair. If he lifted his gaze just a fraction, the spaceport was directly in his line of vision. He had a close-up view of the main landing platform for galactic traffic arrivals and departures. He could pick out cruiser models. He could see pilots, insignias, flags of other planets, supplies being offloaded from freighters.

Ferus lowered his electrobinoculars. On the day the child had showed Force-potential, perhaps there had been a lull. Or a flurry of activity that had caused the watcher's attention to divert to the park below. The watcher would have noted the toddler moving to save the caregiver and would have recorded it, perhaps just to pad a report so that a superior would be pleased. The watcher would know, as an Imperial spy, how important it was to inform on anyone or anything.

The report on the toddler was nothing compared to this. No one on Alderaan could come and go without being seen. Ferus knew that all Alderaanians were required to pass through the main spaceport before going offworld.

Ferus leaned forward. He had just noticed that the dust had been disturbed on the sill to the window, too. Luckily he hadn't smeared the impression when he'd leaned forward. He could just make out some letters and numbers, as though someone had quickly scrawled them in the dust.

LCS...then a smudge. Then...79244-12u712

Ferus quickly committed the letters and numbers to memory.

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He just had to figure out what they meant.

Chapter Six

Vader was ushered into the Emperor's office immediately. Sly Moore opened the door and withdrew quickly, as if to escape a blast. Not a good sign.

His Master waited by the window, staring out at the luxury craft streaming into the Senate landing platform. In the first flush of the Empire, Senators were taking advantage of the end of the tiresome regulations of the Republic. Regulations that safeguarded banking, corporation greed, mining, environmental concerns...they had only prevented the outrageous profits that could be made by the few at the expense of the many. Now the Senators could exploit their connections to the great mining and corporate concerns and, as a result, they were richer than ever. It was one way Palpatine assured their loyalty.

"We need to discuss Operation Twilight," Palpatine snapped. "I'm tired of excuses. You promised me speed and efficiency."

Vader would have to be careful.

"We are very close," Vader said. "Less than a week. The first step of the final phase is in only a few days."

"You must go to Alderaan," Palpatine said.

It was never a good idea to allow surprise to show. "Yes, Master." He kept his silence, awaiting his orders.

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“Senator Organa is our enemy. Behind my back he is trying to rally a group of Senators to fight against the installation of Imperial Governors.”

“They will fail.”

“Of course,” Palpatine rasped. “I *control* the Senate. But its voice will be heard. Organa is a problem. We must move up our plan. We must involve him in Twilight.”

“We have tried,” Vader said.

“I am tired of *failure!*”

“Yes, Master.”

Palpatine tucked his hands inside the wide sleeves of his robe and strolled to a different window. “Ferus Olin is on Alderaan,” he remarked. “Working on something...unimportant. Chasing Force-sensitives. He can do no harm. But your paths will cross on Alderaan, no doubt.”

“I do not know why you continue to promote Olin,” Vader said. “You *know* where his loyalties lie.”

His Master turned to face him. A grimace of amusement was on his face. “Loyalties change. Surely you are proof of that.”

“He will defect to the Empire?”

Palpatine turned away again. “He will do as I *foresee*. He wants power and control. He is *strong* in the Force. A decision awaits him.”

It was a riddle, yes, but its meaning was clear. Vader’s suspicions were correct. With his ruined body he was a disappointment. His Master would promote Ferus until Ferus defected or until Vader destroyed him.

The confrontation lay ahead. He had already set the trap by killing Roan Lands. When Ferus came at him, it would be with rage, not control.

He will not know how to use his anger, Vader thought. *It will be so easy.*

Easy things were not satisfying for him. They never had been. This would be the exception.

Chapter Seven

Chin resting on her hands, Astri Oddo used her fingers to prop open her eyes. She'd been staring at data for six hours straight. It was four o'clock in the morning, and everything was starting to blur.

"Want some more of this?" Clive Flax waved a triple-strength protein stimulant drink in the air.

Astri let her head fall on the desk with a soft thud. "I need sleep."

"Wimp."

Astri rolled her head to look at Clive. "There's nothing here. We've gone through every record we have. You think Flame is a code name for Eve Yarrow. We've looked through every file on Yarrow, and there's nothing linking her to Flame."

"Isn't that strange?" Clive said. He began to manipulate the special repulsorlift chair Dex used when he had to move fast. "We know she's not dead. We know she left her homeworld of Acherin." He spun the chair around to face Astri. "Isn't it weird that she just...disappeared?"

"No," Astri said tiredly. "It's not weird, Clive. It's normal. I mean, it's the new version of normal. She was imprisoned by the Empire. Eve Yarrow had every reason to disappear. She

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managed to get all her wealth off-planet, and she most likely bought herself a new identity.”

“That’s another piece that doesn’t fit,” Clive insisted, making lazy circles in the air on the chair. “How did she manage to smuggle all of her wealth out of a planet occupied by the Empire—*after* she’d been arrested?”

“Maybe she’d prepared ahead of time. Most rich people have a backup plan. Maybe she was just smart.” Astri shrugged. Even the small movement made her feel tired.

“Or connected.”

“Face it, Clive.” Astri closed the holofile on Dex’s desk. “We’re done. There are no records left to search. Nothing more I can slice into. We’ve gone as far as we can go.”

Clive leaped out of the repulsorlift chair as it was still spinning. “You’re right!” He hurried to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To wake up Keets!”

Astri rested her cheeks on her hands and sighed. Time was running out. The group was having trouble settling on the first Moonstrike meeting, but they would find a way. Flame was a hero to them all. It was only Clive who felt something was off. If he was right—and Astri doubted that he was—every resistance movement in the galaxy could be compromised.

Who was Flame? A great hero...or an agent of the Empire?

Hero...agent.

Hero...agent...

“Wake up, my beauty!” Clive’s voice caused her to jerk and bang her chin on the table. She’d fallen into a doze. “We’ve got work to do!”

Keets looked as sleepy as she did. “What’s going on?”

Clive guided him to a chair at Dex’s long dataport desk and pushed him into it.

“We’re investigating Flame. We haven’t told anyone because, well, at this point, we’re a little short on facts.”

“Meaning we don’t have any,” Astri said.

Jude Watson

“Meaning we’re basically going on my intuition,” Clive explained, “which has never failed me in the past.”

Astri raised an eyebrow.

“Well, okay, it’s failed me a number of times, but never mind. Didn’t you tell me that before you went underground you’d done a major exposé of the Banking Clan?”

Keets nodded. “My editor wouldn’t publish it. Somebody leaned on him. So I quit. Then the Empire put a death mark on my head. Not a good day.”

“What did you uncover that would scare the Empire so much?”

“Well, it was before the Clone Wars were over,” Keets said. “The Chancellor still needed the support of the Senate. They weren’t exactly licking the hem of his robes back then. Not like now.” He yawned. “So I dug up the fact that Palpatine had helped the Banking Clan develop a whole system of secret bank accounts for huge corporations on a ring of planets. They weren’t subject to any accounting or taxes. That way Palpatine had the support of the clan, as well as the richest corporations in the galaxy. Of course, this isn’t much of a surprise now. Back then, it could have made a difference. He was costing planets billions of credits in lost revenue.”

“Do you think those accounts still exist?” Clive asked.

“Of course they do,” Keets said, rubbing his eyes. “The only difference is that now Palpatine himself controls them. Credits keep pouring into them, and he doesn’t take anything, but he knows it’s there if he needs it. It’s a brilliant backup plan.”

“So, if a wealthy person wanted to hide wealth, it would be a perfect system for them.”

“Sure.” Keets looked more awake now. “What are you getting at? You’re going to have to bring me up to hyperspeed.”

“You’re saying that Flame’s wealth—the credits she keeps spreading around—that it’s actually held in *Empire-controlled accounts*?” Astri looked at Clive, astounded.

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"I don't know," Clive said. "But wouldn't it be a good idea to find out? Look, if she's Eve Yarrow, that means she left Acherin with a vast fortune. She couldn't just walk into any bank in the galaxy and deposit it without someone reporting on it."

"There are plenty of places in the galaxy to hide wealth," Astri observed.

"Sure, for criminals," Clive said. "But what about upstanding citizens? How could they do it without the Empire's help? It's a whole new galaxy now, my beauty. The Empire's eye is everywhere."

Astri shook her head. "You're jumping to conclusions again."

"So we jump! We don't have time to stay put," Clive declared. He turned to Keets. "Do you still have your notes?"

"Sure. I loaded everything onto Dex's databank. He's trying to collect all the information he can so that any resistance will have a data library to go to once we start really organizing," Keets said.

"Can you trace a specific corporation's holdings? Astri wasn't able to. It's buried."

"No, it *disappeared*," Astri said sharply. "If it was just buried, I would have found it."

"I'm sure the Empire wiped it. But I have the records from before the Clone Wars officially ended," Keets said. "I might be able to turn something up. Yarrow Industries, right?" He moved to the dataport. His fingers flipped through holofiles while he searched. Clive drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Here we go. The operations for Yarrow Industries were moved near the end of the war to Niro 11. That's a moon ringing the planet Niro, which was once pretty much owned by the Banking Clan."

Astri leaned forward. "Does it say who authorized the transfer?"

"No, just that it was authorized. Some top-level Imperial, I'm sure."

Astri read over Keet's shoulder. "Wait a second. That's standard bank security coding. I might be able to slice into the

Jude Watson

records.” Keets moved over, and she sat at the computer. Her fingers flew as she concentrated, wide awake now. In a few minutes, she let out a low whistle. “I can’t break in, but I can see that the account is active. There’s levels of privacy code here. A trigger if it gets accessed from the outside. It’ll send off an alert.”

“So what do you think?” Clive asked.

Astri spun around on her chair. “I think we’re going to Niro 11.”

Chapter Eight

The sight of thousands of blooming yellow flowers amid the grass was amazing indeed. As the park came into view, Ferus stopped walking just to take it in. It was like a blue, green, and golden sea that undulated in waves caused by the breeze, each shiver uncovering another vivid shade.

“What’s the matter?” Hydra asked next to him.

“The flowers,” Ferus said, still visually stunned.

“Oh. That.” She kept up her pace, not pausing a bit. “I’ll start interviewing the parents.”

He had tried to get rid of her, but could think of no plausible excuse to keep Hydra away. She had researched the park and knew about the festival, and of course the two of them could cover more ground than one Inquisitor could.

The park was full of children, as though the city of Aldera had shaken out all their youngsters into this one area. Children running, children squealing, children gathering baskets of the bell-shaped flowers. As they walked into the park, one of them, a charming girl with golden curls, threw a handful of flowers into the air as if in greeting. Golden blossoms fell on Hydra’s brown hood. The disgust on Hydra’s face would have been comical if the whole thing weren’t so serious.

“It will be hard to keep track of all these children,” Ferus said.

Jude Watson

“That’s our job,” Hydra said.

Ferus could only bear Hydra’s company for so long. “Let’s split up so we can cover more territory,” he suggested. She glided away.

Ferus called on the Force to help him slow time and sharpen his perceptions. It was a state of alertness that was very close to battle-mind. Now instead of an indistinguishable mass of happy faces he picked out individual after individual. The greedy boy who could not stop chewing his muffins as he gathered more flowers, the little girl sitting with a small hill of flowers in her lap, the minder who was weaving the flowers into a wreath for her silent and watchful charge.

A little girl caught his attention, a glint of sun on hair so pale it was the color of moonbeams. She scooped up handfuls of petals and scattered them as she ran. A smaller girl followed her, mimicking her movements. Although only a toddler—she couldn’t have been walking for very long—she ran in wide loops through the long grass, without the usual unsteadiness of a girl her age. As Ferus watched, a toy, a model of a starfighter, winged through the air toward the girl. She caught it in her hand and sent it shooting back, looping in the same way she was running. As she ran she caught the toy again and flung it backhanded this time, where it looped and came toward her again.

Not easy. Extraordinary balance and reflexes for someone that young. An observer would merely think her...precocious.

He strolled forward, keeping a parallel track. As he got closer he gathered in the Force around him and searched, but could feel no answering Force from the little girl. If she had a Force connection, he couldn’t feel it. But nevertheless he felt...something. Instinct pricked the back of his neck.

They were approaching the stairway to the top of the bluff. The girl ran up it, following the taller, pale-haired girl. Ferus followed.

“Winter!” the toddler called out the name, and the pale-haired girl turned. The toddler pointed straight ahead at the gate.

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"They fixed it," the older girl said.

A slender young woman with coiled braids hurried up the steps past Ferus. "There you are, you two!"

Ferus tuned out the noise of children's laughter, the wind in the tall grasses. He needed to hear this conversation.

The young woman put her hand on the toddler's hair and stroked it gently. "Yes, Leia. I see it, too. No one will get hurt again."

"Memily won't fall."

"No, blossom. I won't fall." The young woman hugged the little girl.

Leia?

Was that a common name on Alderaan? Could the toddler be Bail's daughter? Ferus searched his memory. He'd read the file on the palace inhabitants on the way to Alderaan. Winter was Leia's playmate, who lived in the royal household.

Stunned, Ferus walked away from the group before they noticed him. So Leia was the toddler who had saved her caregiver. Leia had a possible Force connection. Leia was the child the Inquisitors were looking for.

Did Bail know?

A new thought blazed across Ferus's brain.

Did *Obi-Wan* know?

Why else had he been so insistent that Ferus travel to Alderaan?

Well, thanks, Obi-Wan. Maybe the next time you send me off to investigate, you'll give me all the facts.

Ferus tried to shake off his annoyance. This went beyond his own feelings. There was an Imperial spy on Alderaan, and Bail's family was in danger.

Hydra moved toward him, her cloak sweeping the ground behind her. Ferus noted how she moved straight through the grass, not caring about the children, her face impassive, never smiling. The mothers and fathers at the park had noticed her, and

Jude Watson

Ferus saw how they drew closer to their children as Hydra walked by.

He signaled her not to approach him and headed for the exit. It was important that he not be seen with her.

At the exit to the park, she came up to him. "Find anything?"

He looked at her, into her dark eyes, shiny and impersonal as stones. He would have to protect Bail's family against her, too.

"No," he said. "Nothing."

Chapter Nine

Later that day, Ferus left Hydra at the office of Official Records. Reluctantly he made his way back to the palace. He had no idea what he would do. He couldn't just come out and tell Bail he feared for his family. Bail would think it was a trick.

He made his way through the official entrance, down the twisting path. He struck off in a different direction this time. The flowers gave way to fruit trees, then vegetables in neat rows. He was in the kitchen garden now.

Double doors were flung open onto a small slate patio, and he heard the sound of humming and smelled fresh bread. Ferus walked forward.

The same young woman he'd seen in the park—Memily—was now wearing a long apron and a colorful head-wrap. She stood at the counter, chopping fruit. Around her was a spotless kitchen, a long wooden table that stretched the length of the room, mellow wood polished from years of use. A counter held six loaves of warm bread.

"Stop right there," the young woman said without turning. "Whoever it is, you should know better than to invade my kitchen on baking day."

"Then you shouldn't let the smell out into the garden."

Jude Watson

She turned, smiling, wiping her hands on her apron. "You must be here for the meeting. You can go through those doors and turn left for the reception rooms. Here."

She cut a thick slice of bread and spread it with a honey mixture. "I'll be bringing refreshments to the meeting, but you can sneak a piece. One slice, that's all."

Ferus took a bite of the bread and let out a sigh. "Best in the galaxy," he praised.

"I don't fall for flattery."

"I didn't think you would."

He munched on the bread, watching Memily's quick, efficient movements as she chopped fruit and then spooned it into small pastry shells.

"For the children," she said. "They call these Memily's baskets." She smiled. "I've seen Senator Organa sneak them, too."

"I don't blame him," Ferus said. "The family seems very close," he added.

"Oh, yes, it's a pleasure to work here. The children fill the house with laughter. I do double duty, you know, and watch them sometimes just for the fun of it. This is a royal household, but you'd never know it. There's no protocol here. The Queen has been here in the kitchen, kneading bread with me, many times. Leia, too. They want to bring her up right, you know. Strong and sure, but knowing that she's blessed to have so much. You have to start early. When she came to them, it was a stroke of good fortune. We knew how sad the Queen had been."

Ferus nodded, but he wasn't sure what Memily meant. "It must have been hard, to see her that way," he said. Sometimes a neutral comment would bring you information you wouldn't get with a question.

"She wanted her own children. It wasn't meant to be. But a newborn comes and it becomes the child you're meant to have. Leia has been a great gift to the household."

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Leia was adopted. The news surprised Ferus. And Leia had been a newborn when she came here, which meant she'd been adopted at the end of the Clone Wars. That made sense. The war had created many orphans.

Ferus stood. "Thank you for the bread."

Memily smiled her good-bye and he left the kitchen.

Ferus headed toward the public wing of the house, where Bail had received him earlier. He found himself in a broad hallway and heard the murmur of voices. He drew closer, trying to focus on the sounds. Normally they would be undetectable, but he reached out with the Force.

"...I declined because I think it's too soon," Bail said. "Breha agrees with me."

"I see your thinking. Alderaan can always join a united resistance movement once it's firmly established. There's no need to place us in danger."

"That's not my reason, Dears." Breha spoke now. "We would share the risk if we felt the moment was right. That's not the issue. If you disagree, please tell us. We value your opinion."

"I agree with you and Bail, Breha. But there is something else. Something disturbing I've heard. There are many in Aldera who feel they should form a resistance movement. And prepare for invasion, should that come. They feel we should reexamine our weapons policy in light of what's happening on other planets. What if Alderaan is invaded?"

"If Alderaan is invaded we can hardly hope to defeat the Empire's forces," Bail said. "We have no weapons, no attack ships."

"But the people feel they would want to defend themselves."

"If we got through the Clone Wars without arming ourselves, we can outlast the Empire," Breha said, her tone sharp.

"Of course. I'm just repeating what I've heard."

Ferus heard the sound of boots hurrying along the hallway. He faded back and concealed himself around a corner.

Jude Watson

“Raymus Antilles!” It was the Queen’s voice. “We started the meeting without you, but we can—”

“I have news.”

The doors shut behind Raymus. Suddenly Ferus couldn’t hear a thing. He walked closer, making no sound. His breathing slowed; his movements were quick but completely noiseless. Not a rustle of cloth, not a brush against a wall, not even a disturbance of air. Ferus closed his eyes. He let the Force guide him. The noises of the palace came to him, sounds he hadn’t even registered, sounds he hadn’t heard. Conversation outside in the garden. Memily closing the oven door. An insect was scratching behind a wall....

The door was wood, and there was a new barrier behind it...something to muffle sound. Durasteel most likely. But even durasteel was slightly porous. It was made up of particles, like anything else, like fabric, like wood. And through those spaces he could slip, all attention, everything focused on sound.

Raymus: He has landed at the spaceport. He’ll be here in moments.

Bail: This is not unexpected. Palpatine was bound to send his enforcer sooner or later. The question is, what does he want?

Queen Breha: What should we do?

Raymus: You must receive him, of course. But Bail, if you have a message for Mon Mothma, give it to me now. I can still slip away and get to the Tantive. If he is authorized by the Emperor to search he won’t find anything.

Bail: Here. Take this.

Raymus: They could shut down our landing platform, our hangars...they could imprison Bail....

Breha: He wouldn’t dare.

Raymus: They’ve done it to others.

Breha: We must give the appearance of cooperation. We must avoid an Imperial Governor at all costs.

Bail: Go now. Do not travel to Coruscant directly but head out to the TerraAsta spaceport and get lost in the heavy galactic traffic there.

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Suddenly, Ferus felt the dark side of the Force surge. It was a feeling he was accustomed to now. Usually it was followed by the swish of a cape and the *whoosh, whoosh* of a breath mask. Darth Vader had arrived.

Following his Force connection now, Ferus headed down through the sunny hallways to the back of the palace. He saw Vader immediately. The Dark Lord strode directly through the vegetable garden, crushing everything beneath his boots.

It was time to stall him. Ferus needed to give Raymus a chance to get away.

He found a floor-to-ceiling window that slid open noiselessly with a wave of his hand over the sensor. Vader looked over as he stepped out onto a stone terrace.

"Lord Vader," Ferus said, crossing to greet him. He looked down pointedly at the plants, twisted and matted, at Vader's feet. "Doing your usual work, I see."

"Why are you here?" Vader demanded.

"I needed permission from Senator Organa to search classified files," he said.

"You hardly need *permission*," Vader said.

Behind Vader, he suddenly saw a flash of white, a blur of pink. Winter and Leia ran through a fountain at the far end of the garden.

His heartbeat accelerated, but he knew Vader would be able to detect any nerves, so he used his Force-training to slow it down. He would need to distract him, though. If indeed Leia had a Force-connection, Vader might be able to pick it up.

"The investigation is going well," he said. "Inquisitor Hydra is at the office of Official Records right now."

Vader made an impatient gesture.

"But I'm sure we'll conclude this investigation soon," Ferus continued. "Our next stop is Mustafar," he added.

Vader didn't move. He didn't betray surprise, but Ferus felt it. For the first time, he had penetrated Vader's mask. He knew it. He had rocked him. If they'd been dueling, this would have

Jude Watson

counted as the first contact, the first aggressive move that would surprise his opponent.

Behind Vader, he saw Breha quickly hustle the girls out of the garden.

“This is a waste of my time,” Vader said. “As usual.”

He pushed by Ferus.

Ferus wasn’t insulted. Not in the least.

Mustafar. Amie had been right. Whatever had happened to Vader had happened there.

Now he just had to find out what.

Chapter Ten

Mustafar!

What did Olin mean? What did he know?

Vader could feel his heartbeat push the breath through his mask more quickly. Little explosions of air rang in his ears. How he wished he could throw off this mask, peel off this armor, and get the body he knew back! The strong legs and arms, the fluid movements, the ability to throw himself down on meadow grass next to Padmé....

Stop.

He would not allow those thoughts.

For a moment he had thought of Naboo. Had almost remembered a day with Padmé.

The memories were dimmer, but they were not gone. They could still administer a fresh shot of agony if they came.

He needed Zan Arbor's memory drug. As soon as he was finished with Organa, he would head back to Coruscant and shake that woman like a Nekk battle dog with a bone until she worked day and night to perfect it.

He would get rid of the memories. And get rid of Ferus Olin. The plan was in place.

Jude Watson

Bail turned away from the security monitor, where Darth Vader and Ferus Olin had been conferring. Too much Imperial activity on his planet. Until now the Emperor had treated him more like a pesky insect than a real threat. That had suited his purposes. But now the Empire was becoming consolidated, the Emperor had turned his eye to Alderaan. Definitely not good news.

Vader had entered the compound by using the family gate, heading straight for the private family wing. It had been done deliberately, just to let Bail know that there was nothing in this royal compound that Vader wasn't aware of. He wanted this visit to seem like an invasion.

Bail closed the panel on the security screen and left his office quickly. He decided to meet Vader head on.

He walked without hurrying toward the back rooms of the palace, the private family rooms that Vader had now polluted with his presence. He had already sent Brea to keep Leia out of sight along with the other children. He would stand between Vader and his family and his homeworld. He would not let the corruption in.

The Dark Lord lurked in the inside-outside room they used in the mornings and evenings because the blush of sunset made it glow like a flower. Bail couldn't stand the sight of him there.

"Lord Vader, if you would follow me to the reception room," he said coldly.

Vader ignored the request. "It has come to my attention that you are organizing a protest against the installation of Imperial Governors."

"It is the right of any Senator to deliver votes against measures adopted by the majority."

"You are trying to organize a voting bloc."

"And I am within my full rights to do so."

"You would not think so if you were charged with treason and thrown in an Imperial jail."

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“You wouldn’t dare,” Bail said. “The Senate may be controlled by the Empire, but it still exists. You cannot charge a Senator with treason for following procedural rules.”

“The rules have changed,” Vader said.

“I haven’t been informed.”

“A special session is taking place at this moment. Call off your voting bloc or the treason charge will stand.”

Frustration and anger roiled in Bail. No matter how he twisted and turned, the walls were closing in on him. He saw a future ahead where the Senate would cease to exist. Justice and reason would die with it.

“I should add that the Emperor sees a need for an Imperial Governor here on Alderaan.”

Bail stiffened. “Alderaan has no reason for an Imperial Governor. We have a stable society. There is no risk for the Empire here. We have no weapons.”

“What you have is *insubordination*. The Imperial Governor will arrive in two days.”

Vader turned and left the way he had come, out through the wide doors and across the grass, cutting through the trampled garden on his way to the family gate.

Only then did Bail allow himself to tremble. He put out a hand behind him and slowly sank onto a chair.

Things were changing too fast. He was failing to see the Emperor’s next step. He needed to be quicker.

He needed to confer with Mon Mothma.

He remembered the striking woman who had come to his office...Flame. She had been vetted by those close to him. She was the real thing. She was linking the resistance members, planet by planet. What she had done so far was impressive.

Alderaan couldn’t hold out alone. He would need allies. Secret allies. Especially if they sent an Imperial Governor. Dearsa told him that there were those who were reconsidering the use of weapons. If there were only a few, soon there would be more.

Jude Watson

Moonstrike could be a way out for Alderaan. A confederacy of planets would give them support. If he and the other Senators joined, it would be a political and grassroots alliance, and that could be potentially powerful. He had sent a message to Mon Mothma with Raymus Antilles, asking her to meet with Flame.

Maybe it was time he reconsidered. Maybe it was time to join Moonstrike.

Chapter Eleven

Zan Arbor had one of the apartments that took up an entire floor, in one of the upper levels of the tower. Trever stood in front of the door, running his fingers across its edges. A little discreet explosive would blast the lock. But he had to cover his tracks, too; he couldn't leave evidence that he'd been here.

He had a solution for that, a trick he'd used back on Bellassa. Tucked inside his tunic were a variety of items that would help him replace the sensor suite that locked the door. Even in high-security buildings the actual locks on the doors were usually pretty basic. The trick was not to use too much alpha charge to damage the door.

He had never exactly perfected it.

He had learned a few things from Ferus, however. One, you had to *believe* you could do the thing. Two, you had to be very, very careful. Three, you could always run.

Carefully, Trever packed his alpha charge, estimating the blast he'd need. He took out some synthblast and pushed the gummy material along the seam of the door. Then he embedded the small alpha charge in it.

He set the charge and backed up.

A small explosion, a slight puff of smoke. Sounded pretty good.

Jude Watson

Trever bent over to examine his work. Although he was anxious to get inside, he knew he had to fix the lock now, just in case he was surprised later by someone entering the suite. He could possibly talk his way out, but not if a busted door was between him and freedom. The first mistake a thief could make was impatience.

He spread out his tools on the floor and went to work. Within three minutes he had replaced the small sensor suite that controlled the locking mechanism, sanded the metal flap, and polished it. You'd have to look very close to see the work.

He quickly replaced his tools in their pouch and fitted it inside his tunic. He was ready to search the apartment.

First he went through it, checking it out. There was a large living area with a window that overlooked the busy space lanes of Galactic City. A large terrace. He checked the mechanism and saw that the window rose into the ceiling above so that the terrace was accessible to the room. No landing platform, though. That meant she had to use one of the many semi-private ones that staggered up the building. There was a network of turbolifts that took the swells straight to their door.

All in all, pretty swanky.

There was a small, windowless room at the rear that Trever assumed could be used as a small closet or office. Instead, a bed had been moved in. He saw a maroon tunic neatly folded on top of a small table and a hair ornament with a small white stone. This was Linna Naltree's room. Naltree had saved his life when he'd been almost paralyzed with fear (okay, he could admit it now, he'd lost it) deep inside an Imperial-controlled factory in Ussa. He owed her.

He went back to the bedroom. All the cabinetry was built in flush to the wall. It didn't take him long to find Zan Arbor's datapad. This one was larger than a personal datapad, and heavier. Here was where she would keep most of her files, he guessed, accessing them when she needed to and storing them on a lighter model she would keep with her.

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He flipped through the holo-directory, but all the files were coded. He didn't have Ferus or Astri's expertise, so he didn't even try to decode them. He'd hoped to find some stray piece of information that had been carelessly left unguarded—a message, a directive, anything—but he was disappointed.

Trever heard a noise from the other room that he recognized instantly—the door to the terrace had just risen. Someone must have entered the apartment without his hearing it, which was spooky because he'd kept an ear out the whole time.

Trever tugged down his cap. He'd try to get out without being seen...but if he was, he'd have to talk his way out. He reached for the smallest alpha charge he possessed and held it in his fingers. He'd gotten out of tough situations before by tossing the charge. The charge was so small that it didn't make a sound, but the whisper of smoke and the smell had convinced people that a small electrical fire was in progress. Trever would then pretend to be a handyman's assistant, sent to check out the problem.

Stealthily Trever tiptoed to the bedroom door. He peeked out into the living area. He didn't see anyone, but someone must be there. The large window had disappeared into the ceiling. He felt the hint of a breeze.

He waited, but he didn't hear a sound. Could the window be on a timer?

This was making him antsy.

He cautiously moved forward enough to see a little further into the room.

Nothing.

He fingered the alpha charge. Might as well use it. He tossed it gently just a few meters into the room and stepped back.

Nothing. No smoke. No smell.

It was a dud. Great.

He'd have to bluff his way out somehow. Unless there wasn't anyone out there at all....

No one could be *that* quiet.

Trever moved out into the room. No one was there.

Jude Watson

He let out the breath he was holding. He'd seen enough anyway. No need to push his luck.

He looked around for his dud alpha charge. Where had he aimed it, exactly?

He caught the shadow at his left, felt someone turning, coming out of nowhere, in full attack mode. He reached for his blaster, already knowing it was too late.

The blaster was kicked out of his hand. Trever gasped as he whirled around and saw Ry-Gaul standing in front of him, Trever's alpha charge in his large hand.

"What are you doing here?" Trever asked furiously.

Ry-Gaul's usual neutral expression didn't waver. "You first."

"Ferus asked me to monitor Zan Arbor's comings and goings—"

"This isn't monitoring. It's breaking and entering."

"I just took it one step further, that's all. I thought if I could get a look at Zan Arbor's datapad...well, it's coded."

"I would expect that."

"Ferus needs a plan if he wants to rescue Linna when he gets back. There's got to be a way to get her out of here."

"There is."

"How?"

Ry-Gaul moved swiftly through the room, his silver eyes taking it all in. "I don't know yet."

"Hey, your turn. Why are *you* here?"

"Tobin Gantor escaped from the Empire."

"Linna's husband?"

"Her husband and my friend. He's here on Coruscant. He contacted me. Linna managed to send him a message on a secret channel. Zen Arbor is working on a memory agent. When she perfects it, she's going to administer it to Linna as her first adult subject."

Trever let out a long whistle. "Nice way to say thanks. How close is Z.A. to the end?"

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“We have no way of knowing that. But Linna thinks they’re close.”

“So we’ve got to rescue her,” Trever said. “We can’t risk waiting for Ferus.”

“Who’s *me*? I work alone.”

Trever shook his head. “Not this time, you don’t.”

Ry-Gaul regarded him for a moment. “All right,” he said. He moved back toward the bedroom again.

“So what are we doing?”

“Rule number one when you have a hostage,” Ry-Gaul said. “Never follow a routine. Zan Arbor is going to arrive this evening on one of those landing platforms, and we’re going to be on it. We can snatch Linna and get away. If everything goes right.”

He sat down at Zan Arbor’s dataport. “The work files have layers of coding, but I’m betting the instructions on where to land are routed through the Republica tower’s system. We’re just going to do a little slicing into that.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Jedi have many skills.”

Trever watched as Ry-Gaul worked the keyboard. He pulled up a schematic of the hotel landing platforms. “That one, I think,” he murmured. “Level 1010. East side. We’ll have a clear shot out into a major space lane. We can get lost in the traffic.” He pushed several keys. “All right then. When Zan Arbor returns, she’ll have new directions telling her where to land.”

“And?” Trever asked.

Ry-Gaul stood. “We’ll be waiting.”

Chapter Twelve

Clive couldn't help it. He was enjoying himself. He'd been the one to suggest that Astri pose as his wife when they infiltrated the banking system on Niro 11. She'd known it was the best course to take, but she couldn't hide her discomfort.

It made sense to pose as a wealthy couple seeking a safe place to stash the loot they were hiding from their homeworld tax authorities. They would pass scrutiny and get into the inner sanctum of the bank, where an old source of Keets's had agreed to meet with them.

They arrived at the spaceport in a driving rain. They had already been cleared while onboard the luxury class cruiser and were immediately whisked aboard a private air shuttle with a uniformed pilot. As soon as they were seated he pressed a lever and a tray slid out with a variety of refreshments.

"Help yourselves," he said. "We'll be at Bank Niro Eleven in twelve point two minutes."

Clive leaned back against the cushy upholstery. "I could get used to this. Hey—I'm *already* used to it."

Astri looked tensely out the window at the streaming rain. "Being rich is not all it's cracked up to be."

"Oh, that's right, you were married to a politician," Clive said. "Must have been an easy life."

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“Easy,” Astri repeated. She turned her dark eyes on Clive and gave him a look of such sadness that it stopped the jest on his lips.

They said nothing for the remainder of the ride. They sped over an icy gray sea, so vast they couldn’t see the edges of it, and headed for a cluster of tall buildings, each with a differently colored spire at the top.

“Your meeting is in Building Yellow,” the driver said. “An escort will be at the landing platform. Have a pleasant stay.”

He piloted the craft to a smooth landing on a landing platform under a canopy. Not a drop of rain touched them as they exited. An escort waited, a tall, angular woman in a long white tunic. She inclined her head.

“Mr. and Mrs. Telstarr,” she said. “Herk Bloomi is expecting you.”

She led them to a turbolift and it rose swiftly. Clive looked at the levels flash. It stopped on level three hundred and ten.

They stepped out to a panoramic view of silver lake and gray sky. Up here the rain had turned to hardened crystals that tapped on the transparisteel. They were led to a plush couch and left there. The air was cold and Astri shivered.

“I don’t like this place,” she said. “There’s a bad feeling here.”

“It’s the feeling of those who have too much and want to keep it all to themselves,” Clive said.

Moments later a plump, fastidious older man entered. His bald head shone and his boots gleamed with polish. “Mr. and Mrs. Telstarr. Pleased to meet you. Herk Bloomi, director of new accounts at Bank Niro.”

“Pleased to meet you, mate. We’re looking for a safe place to stash our considerable fortune,” Clive said. “Just what you like to hear, eh?”

“Just a moment. I’ll activate the privacy booth. Our clients feel more secure that way.”

Jude Watson

He waved his hand over a sensor and curved transparent walls lowered around them, encasing them in a small room within the room. He pressed a button and the walls acquired a shimmer.

"We can see out but no one can see in. And this blocks surveillance devices. Complete privacy, but we should be brief," Herk said.

"Thank you for seeing us," Astri said. "Keets Freely said that you'd agreed to help."

"I am a banker," Bloomi said. "A banker believes in certain things. The sanctity of wealth. The right to privacy. I don't agree with what the Empire is doing. The financial future of the galaxy depends on the right of the wealthy to protect their accounts. We are now asked to hand over details of deposits and withdrawals on a weekly basis to an Imperial investigator." He shuddered. "It's a terrible thing."

Clive couldn't believe it. The Empire was smashing whole societies and this guy was worried about some fat rat's pile of credits?

Astri shot him a look that told him to be quiet. She leaned forward and asked softly, "So you'll help us?"

He licked his lips nervously. "Keets said that you needed details on only one account...."

"Only one. It will help us enormously," Astri said. "You'll be doing a great service to the galaxy."

"The Empire's disregard for rules offends me," he said. "That's the only reason I would violate a client's privacy...and you say that you are trying to help this person...."

"Absolutely, mate," Clive said. "It's life or death. And money."

"All right then." Bloomi pressed a button on his armrest and a small datapad slid out. He tapped the keys. "Yarrow Industries moved their accounts offworld near the end of the Clone Wars."

"Who moved the accounts?" Clive asked.

"At first, Evin Yarrow, the chief officer of Yarrow Industries. After his death, his daughter Eve completed the transfer. It was

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under Imperial order. That happened to many of our clients around that time.”

“So even though the Empire moved the account, she still controlled it?”

“Oh, very much so. She asked that we key the Yarrow account to numbers instead of names. We also wiped all evidence of ties to Acherin.”

“Is the account still active?” Astri asked, even though she knew the answer.

“Oh, yes. Regular payouts.” Bloomi checked the screen. “As a matter of fact, the payouts have been increasing of late.”

“Where do the credits transfer to?” Clive asked.

“A numbered account on Revery. Do you know the planet? Many of our clients have homes there.”

Clive nodded. He’d never been there, but he’d certainly heard of Revery. It was a noted haunt for the super-rich. It was known for its beaches and mountains...and also for its privacy.

“Can you get us Eve Yarrow’s coordinates on Revery?” Clive asked.

“No,” Bloomi said, his head bent. “No, that’s not accessible. Addresses are strictly private.”

“But you said that the Empire violates the privacy of your clients,” Astri said. “That they cross-check numbers with names...so if they do that, you must have the information in your files.”

Clever girl, Clive thought.

“I told you, there’s only so far I can go,” Bloomi said. He raised his head. Clive saw fear in his eyes. “I gave you the planet—isn’t that enough?”

Astri hesitated. “Suppose we were clients of yours, and we needed a moment to confer? Couldn’t you step out of the privacy room and leave us for a moment? And maybe forget to close the datapad?”

The decision weighed in his eyes.

Jude Watson

"If we promise to never ask you for information again," Astri added.

Clive wanted to lean on the guy, but he knew it would be a mistake. Finally Bloomi pushed himself off the couch with his balled fists. "I, uh, need to check on something."

He pressed a button and the transparent wall slid back. Clearing his throat nervously, he slid out. The wall slid back.

Astri quickly revolved the datapad so she could see it. She clicked on the keys. "He left the coded files open to his security code. Good man. Here's the transaction list...if I just jump to the numbered file contact info...yes," Astri murmured, satisfied. "Memorize these coordinates." Softly she read out the numbers.

Clive nodded. "Got it."

Astri looked out. The room was empty. "Well, as long as I'm here..." She clicked a few more keys, searching.

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. Anything out of the ordinary. I—"

Suddenly Clive saw Bloomi enter the room with several Imperial officers. "Close it," he said softly, even though he knew they couldn't hear.

Astri quickly shut the datapad as the wall rose.

There was now a sheen of perspiration on Bloomi's high forehead. "Mr. and Mrs. Telstarr, we have a security check. Strictly routine."

Clive admired Astri's coolness. Posing as a rich woman, she put on an irritated look. "Do they know who we *are*?" she hissed at the banker.

"Strictly routine, madam," Bloomi answered. Clive noted that his hands were shaking. "It will take only a moment."

"Now, angel hair, let's not hold up these gentlemen," Clive said. "This is the price we pay for a secure galaxy. Here you go, sirs." He handed over his ID doc and motioned for Astri to do the same.

With a slight pursing of her lips, she did so.

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Clive waited while the lead officer scanned their docs through his datapad. He wished he could dump a bucket of ice water on Bloomi's head. The bloke was now sweating profusely, his collar damp and the few strands of hair he possessed now plastered to his scalp.

Astri waited with the air of a woman who did not like to wait. Her training as a Senator's wife obviously came in handy.

The check went on for too long. Clive saw the moment the Imperial officer registered that something was amiss.

"If you'll wait here for just another moment," he said.

"Our business is concluded," Astri said. "We were just leaving."

"I'm sorry, I'll have to insist." The officer's tone was still polite. He couldn't afford to alienate them if they really were the fabulously wealthy Telstarrs.

Which they weren't. Maybe the real Telstarrs had noticed that someone was using their ID docs. Even though Curran had used his best contact for the docs, you could never trust the black market completely.

They were in trouble.

The officers moved off to confer. Probably waiting for a superior to tell them what to do.

"Do you think they know?" Bloomi wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Do you think so?"

"Do you have a cruiser with a hyperdrive?" Clive asked him in a low tone.

"Of course. In my business you need the best...wait a moment. You're not suggesting...."

"Give me the security code. We'll try to get it back to you if we can. Sometime."

"You can't just...leave!"

"I'm afraid we have to. In another minute, that officer is going to get an order to arrest us." Clive kept a pleasant smile on his face and leaned back on the couch as though he didn't have a care in the world.

Jude Watson

"If that happens, they might arrest you, too," Astri said. "But if you give us your cruiser, we'll make it look like we stole it from you. You can claim innocence."

"Just don't tell them who we were investigating, no matter what," Clive warned.

Bloomi wrung his hands. "I don't know what to do."

"Look natural," Astri said through her smile. "Tell me the code."

He told them the code they'd need and where to find the speeder. "But how are you going to get to the turbolift?"

"Leave that to us."

"You're not going to use blasters, are you?"

Clive rose smoothly. "My advice? Duck."

"Let me go first," Astri told him, and before he could protest she walked toward the officers.

"This is absurd," she said. "Our liner is about to depart. I demand to see your superior officer!"

"We really must be going," Clive said, taking Astri by the elbow.

The officer stepped forward. "Sir, you can't go—"

They kept moving toward the turbolift. The officer was nervous now. There was still a chance that the ID doc confusion was just a snag in communications. He was reluctant to take responsibility for attacking them.

"We'll be available at the spaceport," Clive said. "We're on the luxury liner *Iridescence*."

"We can clear up any confusion before departure," Astri said. "Send your superior to our stateroom."

Clive closed the remaining distance to the turbolift and hit the sensor.

The officer finally realized he had to do something or risk a long term as a security officer on a mining planet. He drew his blaster. "Stop right there."

"Don't be silly," Clive said, taking a step back toward them. "I'm sure we can work this out..."

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The turbolift opened.

Clive and Astri drew their blasters. They fired at the lights overhead and the sensor suite that controlled the transparent partitions. The partitions descended all at the same time. The officer's blasterfire went awry. It pinged off the transparent walls and ricocheted around the room.

Astri and Clive jumped into the turbolift. It descended swiftly.

"We have maybe a minute before they figure this out," Clive said. "Be prepared to run."

They burst off the turbolift as it opened onto the private landing platform. They found Bloomi's cruiser parked near the lip of the platform. Clive jumped in. Astri blasted the security console next to the cruiser.

"They won't be able to tell we had the code," she said. "Bloomi might escape detection that way."

Stormtroopers suddenly pounded through the entrance. Clive powered up the engines as Astri somersaulted away past the worst of the fire, jumped up on the back of the cruiser, and scrambled for the open cockpit. "Go!" she screamed above the sound of blasterfire.

She leaped in the cockpit, still firing, as he pushed the engines. They screamed out into the sky. Clive hit the upper atmosphere and then space. He could see Imperial fighters heading after them. Cannonfire streaked toward them.

"Hyperspace coming up," he said. "Hang on."

In a rush of stars, they evaded the fighters.

"That was close," Clive said.

"Can we trust Bloomi not to talk?" Astri asked, tucking her blaster back in her belt. "If he does, we'll find an Imperial attack ship as we come out of hyperspace at Revery."

"Do I trust Herk?" Clive shook his head. "No. All they have to do is show him a picture of a torture droid and he'll cave. But maybe they won't ask him the right questions. Maybe they'll just assume we were your ordinary bank robbers."

"We could always go back to Coruscant," Astri said.

Jude Watson

They exchanged a look.

Astri leaned forward. “Onward to Revery,” she said.

Chapter Thirteen

Ferus closed his comlink. Obi-Wan wasn't responding on the emergency channel. What could he be doing? Herding banthas?

He continued on his way. He had donned the Inquisitor robe again, hating it, but knowing it could help him. He was heading for the spaceport. He could only hope that the letters and numbers scrawled in the dust had something to do with what the spy had seen through the electrobinoculars.

He had a feeling that Obi-Wan had known very well that the Force-adept he was chasing was Bail's daughter. It explained why he was here. But what else did Obi-Wan know that he wasn't telling?

Ferus hadn't seen Darth Vader since that morning at the palace, but he could feel him. Not through the Force, but through an instinct that his enemy was occupying space near him. Ferus touched the hidden pocket where the Sith Holocron nestled. His lungs burned. He took a ragged breath. He felt as though he were falling into a black hole, slowly, while familiar faces, people he loved, homes he'd lived in, places he'd enjoyed were all around him as he spun past them, unable to touch them, unable to connect.

Jude Watson

His salvation could be this small object in his pocket. Grief had not only sapped his power, but his purpose; the Force could restore it, but not the Force he knew.

He took his hand away. He no longer knew which thoughts were coming from him and which were under the influence of the Holocron. That scared him, but it thrilled him deeply, too. He knew he should throw the Holocron away, toss it in the deepest point of the great lake of Alderaan....

You cannot throw it away. It is yours now. By accepting it, you own it. You have already begun the journey. Soon you will recognize it.

Whose voice was that?

Ferus rubbed his forehead. He had felt the voice as part of himself, deeper than his own voice. Did it speak truth or lies? What was happening to him?

His comlink buzzed, and he snatched it from his belt. It was Hydra.

“Checking in.”

“Nothing to report on this end,” Ferus said. “How’s the document search going?”

“I’m getting full cooperation now. Lord Vader’s presence on the planet has helped us. They’re worried about an Imperial takeover. We have *fear* working for us now.” Hydra’s flat monotone held the tinge of satisfaction.

“Well, keep going. Contact me if you learn anything.” Ferus ended the communication.

He was racing the clock now. He didn’t think Hydra would learn anything about Leia at the documents office, but she would soon give that up and look a different way. He had to discount the rumor before Hydra found the girl.

And, in the meantime, he had to find the Imperial spy.

He took the turbolift up to the busy spaceport. Vehicles lined up for takeoff and refueling. The command center was in a round building off to the side. Ferus approached, throwing back his hood slightly.

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When he entered, the busy workers looked up, then quickly looked down. They wouldn't want to give him any information, but they'd have to. He wished he could tell them he was on their side.

He went up to the woman who looked as though she was in charge. "I have an information request," he said.

"We're busy here." Her voice was curt, but her eyes were scared.

"I just need to identify this vehicle. The spaceport code is LCS79244-12u712."

"That's not a vehicle code."

"Then what is it?" he asked.

She pressed her lips together. For a moment he thought she'd refuse.

"Would you rather Lord Vader came here to enquire?" he asked. He hated to push that way, but he had to know.

She looked down. "It's a product entry code," she said. "LCS means Load Coded and Shipped. That means that a delivery came into the spaceport and we shipped it out again."

"Then you must have the address where it was shipped."

She turned toward the console. "I'll plug it in. But I can tell you right now, the destination code is wrong. First of all, there aren't enough numbers."

Ferus remembered the smudge. Some of the numbers must have been wiped out.

"Second, there are no letters in the destination code. I know it was shipped to Aldera—the code is twelve. But the rest of it doesn't make sense."

"See what you can do."

She called up the list of shipments. "I can't find it." She looked at him defensively. "See for yourself." She tilted the screen toward him. "We get hundreds of shipments. Your numbers don't make sense in terms of the system."

Ferus studied the screen. She wasn't lying. It would be impossible to trace without the correct sequence of numbers.

Jude Watson

He turned away, frustrated. At least he knew it was a shipment the spy had been looking at. Or maybe heard about...there was no way to know.

He couldn't leave the planet until he had answers. He couldn't leave the Organas at the mercy of the Empire. Something was going on here. The knowledge of it was deep in his bones. He had to keep looking.

He spent the night at the temporary quarters that had been arranged for him, and woke before dawn. He decided that if he searched the warehouse again, he might come across something he'd overlooked.

It was still dark as he made his way across the deserted park. The warehouses loomed ahead, dark sentinels overlooking the square of green.

He was crossing toward the warehouse when he saw it.

"If you want to get lucky, open your eyes."

Thank you, Siri!

Crouched between the taller warehouses and hangars, Ferus saw an old, decrepit building he hadn't noticed before. It was built of old stone, bleached and pockmarked from hundreds of years of duty. It was only about ten stories, and appeared abandoned.

Above the doorway there were numbers chiseled into the stone in the old style. Crumbling, darkened with age, hard to read, but there.

8712

He thought back to the "u" he thought he had seen. Maybe it had been the lower part of the number 8. Part of it had been wiped away.

Could it be this easy? Could the shipment have been sent across the street from the spy's overlook?

Why not? If you wanted to keep tabs on a shipment, what better place could there be?

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Ferus crossed back and carefully examined the building as he walked past. He did it without seeming to look, keeping his head forward and striding purposefully. Even though the area was deserted he knew that there could be night workers about in the surrounding buildings. Even the spy could be at his post this early, though spaceport traffic was light.

In the short time it took to walk by, he was able to spot the security panel and identify it as one he recognized. Very high-tech, considering the building.

He turned at the corner and went down the block, past the backs of the warehouses. Many of them had landing platforms, but the smaller warehouse did not. A high security fence surrounded it, most likely with some sort of electroshock capacity.

The street was deserted. Ferus gathered the Force and leaped. He sailed over the fence easily and landed in the backyard of the warehouse, a small area of crumbling permacrete.

There was one small durasteel door. The same security panel. Ferus had no problem bypassing the code. He heard the lock click.

He pushed open the door and walked inside to a small hallway. There was no turbolift, just a curving ramp leading upward. The lighting was dim. He approached slowly, listening for sounds. He heard a soft *whirr* and quickly pressed himself into the shadows. A surveillance droid flew by slowly, rotating as it went. It had a visual field, not infrared, so if he stayed out of sight he'd be all right.

Ferus walked up the ramp to the first floor. He could see that he was in a large open space. Rusted speeder parts were dumped in piles along the walls. An old system of automated pulleys hung from the ceiling, parts dangling, rusty and coated with dirt. He walked back and forth, looking carefully, but didn't find anything but more old parts and tools.

Not too promising, so far. Evading the droids, he searched the next level, and the next. Finally he reached the top floor. He

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looked overhead. He could see the mechanism for a retractable roof. That would be how shipments could be moved in and out. There was plenty of room here to land a small barge. If the operation was done at night, the offloading could be quick and close to private in the middle of a city.

At first this floor looked like the others. But as he walked closer, Ferus saw the durasteel bins stacked up against the walls.

New durasteel.

Ferus got down on his haunches. He saw the airport code stenciled on one side.

LCS226579244 12 8712

SPEEDER PARTS was stamped on the side.

He ran his hand along the top. It was unsealed. Cautiously, he pulled open the top.

The bin was empty.

Ferus went from bin to bin. They were all empty. He crouched down and began to examine the floor underneath the roof. He took out his tiny glowlight and ran it over the floor.

Yes. A craft had landed here recently. He saw the scorch marks, the scratches.

He stayed in that position for long minutes, thinking.

He was so deep in thought he didn't hear the soft footsteps until they were coming up the last turn of the ramp. Someone trying very, very hard to be quiet.

Ferus dashed for cover as the room suddenly lit up with blasterfire. He dived to the floor and rolled, cursing his inattention. He rolled to safety behind a partially dismantled airspeeder. The blasterfire pinged. He smelled hot metal.

He ran behind a pile of dismantled parts. The blasterfire followed him. Ferus had run in order to assess. Now he knew that his pursuer was a good shot. Good information to have when you're trapped.

Ferus considered what to do. He would have to escape without using his lightsaber. If he were being attacked by the Imperial spy—and chances were pretty much one hundred

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percent that he was—the information would get back to the Emperor. Ferus didn't relish having to explain why, as a supposed Imperial Inquisitor, he was investigating a mystery shipment being tracked by an Imperial spy. But worse than that, any Force activity on this planet would only throw the spotlight more clearly on it. Ferus needed to divert the Emperor's attention from Alderaan, not attract it.

What he needed was a push-back. Something that would send his assailant running so that he could trail him.

Ferus leaped above to the rack and pulley system that still held old parts and engines. He crawled forward and found the mechanism that moved the parts forward on an automatic track. He activated it.

Now the rack moved forward, jerking slightly as it went. The noise brought the attention of the shooter, and blasterfire streaked through the air, hitting behind Ferus now as the rack moved forward. Ferus released an airspeeder engine. It smashed to the floor. Then a windscreen. Engine parts. A halfway dismantled pit droid. Sparks flew upward as the metal screeched against the permacrete floor.

The rack kept moving, faster now, on the fastest speed that Ferus could locate, and he balanced on the pulley, moving forward and dropping parts and engines and heavy sheets of metal as it went. It was tricky to keep his balance on the pulley as it jerked along, but he managed it.

The space was now full of the sound of crashing metal, and Ferus tracked the shadow as it moved, trying to get a fix on him. Ferus's aim was to corner him, but he was moving so fluidly and the pulley system just wasn't fast enough.

If only he was strong enough in the Force to give the heavy objects a little *push*.

Within his tunic he felt the Holocron glow.

You are forgetting what your rage can do.

Jude Watson

His irritation at the spy surprising him was just a spark, something he had accepted and released. It had been so unimportant. It got in the way of Jedi battle-mind.

He revived it. Fanned it.

His anger grew.

How dare he interfere with me?

He, just a low-level spy. He thinks he's going to win.

He is nothing.

The next airspeeder part didn't just crash to the floor. It flew through the air with great velocity, smashing over the shadow's head. Ferus fed his anger until it balled up into rage and shot out into the space, taking the machinery and parts and flinging them toward the hiding places of the spy.

Satisfaction coursed through him. Thoughts of forcing the spy to flee and tailing him vanished. *I can smash him I can kill him I can destroy him....*

He saw the shadow moving toward the door, a tall, thin figure that seemed familiar. How remarkable that even through the red haze of his anger his perceptions could be so sharp....

You see? You use the anger. It does not confuse. It sharpens.

The spy ran out toward the ramp.

Ferus jumped from the pulleys. He leaped over the piles of smoking metal.

His mind cooled. He saw even as he ran how thoroughly he had destroyed this space.

He didn't feel satisfaction anymore. He felt unsettled. Guilty. He pushed away the feeling. He would deal with it all later. Now it was time to track the spy.

Ferus ran down the ramp, running fast but not fast enough to risk letting the spy know he was being followed. He would assume that it would take some time for Ferus to fight his way through the machinery piled on the floor in the hangar above. He wouldn't imagine that Ferus would be on his heels.

He followed the spy down the ramp, down below street level. Ferus wanted to kick himself. He hadn't done such a good job of

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reconnoitering after all. The buildings were linked by an underground passage.

The passage was dimly lit and wide enough for the biggest gravsled to operate. Ferus could hear the spy's progress and tracked him through his footsteps. He had slowed down now, assuming he hadn't been followed. Ferus followed him in the passage for about a kilometer. Then he hopped aboard a turbolift. Ferus looked up at the indicator. He'd gotten off at street level. He counted out a few seconds and then followed.

Ferus emerged into a surprisingly busy street. Dawn was just beginning to streak the sky with orange. He saw gravsleds and utility ramps set up down at the end of the street. He realized that an open-air market was being set up right under the shadow of the spaceport.

Ferus followed the activity into the market. It must have been a permanent fixture, for the large square was filled with stalls that marched in winding rows. The partitions were made of heavy durasteel poles and brightly colored awnings. Open bins held piles of items.

The day's unloading was taking place—vegetables and fruits, baked goods, household items, robes, cloths, plants, flowers, tools. The merchants chatted in small groups, or busily set up their stalls.

Ferus made his way through the crowd, looking for the figure he'd chased. He felt sure he'd recognize him by his height and the way he moved, even though he hadn't seen his face.

Instead, he bumped into Dearra. A basket filled with fruit and muffins was on her arm. She moved her basket to her other arm, as though she couldn't trust him not to steal it.

"Just enjoying the bounty of your planet," he said, gesturing to the stalls around him.

Her face flushed. "It seems your Empire believes that our bounty is yours for the taking." As if afraid she'd said too much, she quickly walked away.

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Ferus stood in the middle of the market. Around him was food he could not reach for and people who despised him.

Inside his tunic was a dark future. A path lay before him that all his life he had known was wrong.

He had wanted to kill that spy. Just as Vader had killed Roan, for no good reason except he was in his way.

If he killed Vader using the same kind of power, would that turn him into just another version of the Dark Lord?

Ferus pressed his chest with his hand, felt his heartbeat. He saw everything ahead of him, all the wrong he could do. He was being pulled along that path.

Why couldn't he stop himself?

Chapter Fourteen

Ry-Gaul and Trever waited at the landing platform all afternoon for Zan Arbor to return. They knew she varied her routine and could return at any time. Waiting wasn't too hard. It was *where* they had to wait that was the problem.

It happened to be behind the exhaust grille of a star yacht, but they didn't have a choice. There was no other place to conceal themselves on the platform. The exhaust grille was hot. It was cramped. It smelled. Still, Ry-Gaul and Trever lay curled against the metal for hours.

And Ry-Gaul wasn't the most thrilling conversationalist. All Trever was able to get out of him was, "Later or soon, it will happen."

Thanks.

As the sunset painted the windows of the tower bright orange, Ry-Gaul stirred. Zan Arbor's transport appeared, a top of the line airspeeder in brushed chromium. She made no attempt at disguise. She drove the luxury speeder with the roof retracted, looping once around the crowded plaza below to show herself off.

Trever nudged Ry-Gaul. "Linna's in the back."

Jude Watson

The Jedi nodded, his pale gray eyes never leaving the sight. Zan Arbor dipped the craft and moved smoothly down to land on the platform.

As Zan Arbor gathered her things to depart, Ry-Gaul leaped out of the exhaust grille and slid underneath the belly of the star yacht. Trevor followed. They waited while Zan Arbor exited, followed by Linna.

They had already decided to grab Linna in the small reception room that lay beyond the entrance. There, occupants at the hotel could take off their outer garments and access turbolifts to take them to their private apartments.

Zan Arbor and Linna disappeared inside. Trevor and Ry-Gaul followed. They found themselves in a small reception area with hammered azurite walls.

From an open doorway ahead they could hear Zan Arbor giving loud orders to a fussing protocol droid. "Take this cape and press it. And no, I do *not* want the chaughaine tonight. How many times have I told you? The emerald satina—I'm going to the opera."

Ry-Gaul signaled to Trevor. It was time to alert Linna that they were ready to take her away.

They started forward, but Ry-Gaul suddenly put his hand on Trevor's shoulder to stop him. He leaned over and whispered, "Trouble."

Instead of heading toward Zan Arbor, Ry-Gaul turned to the turbolift.

He accessed it and entered with Trevor on his heels. The turbolift was the size of a small room, with gilt walls and a plush floorcovering.

"Uh, this seems to be a no-way-out situation to me," Trevor offered.

Ry-Gaul held onto the side rails, kicked out, and supported himself upside down while he kicked up at the roof panel.

He caught the panel with one hand when it fell and yet managed at the same time to push himself through, upside down.

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Trever threw his head back, peering up into the blackness. He'd never seen such a display of agility. "Wow," he said. "Are you—"

His words were choked off as Ry-Gaul's feet came down, grabbed him around his shoulders, and yanked him upward. Trever was whisked through the opening and landed hard on the top of the turbolift. He was about to protest but Ry-Gaul motioned him to be quiet as he silently slid the roof panel back in place.

Trever shot him a questioning look. What could be more trouble than sitting on top of an express turbolift that no doubt went extremely fast, waiting for a crazy genius evil scientist to enter it?

Then he knew. He heard the rasp of the breathing.

Darth Vader.

Zan Arbor's voice sounded petulant as they entered the turbolift. "I didn't know you were back in Imperial City, but I'm glad to have a chance to talk to you. You promised me more human subjects."

"You promised me progress."

"I have made tremendous progress. It's all in my reports. But I still need adult subjects."

"You have done enough research. It is time to produce the agent."

"I don't have time for this. I have tickets to the opera tonight. I'm meeting Senator Sauro."

"Let us step inside. I am not finished."

The turbolift rose swiftly. Trever turned slightly to look up to the end of the shaft. At this rate they should reach it in less than a minute. He wondered how much room there was between the elevator roof and the ceiling of the shaft.

"I am a perfectionist," Zan Arbor said. "That is the reason you hired me, correct? It's hardly the time to push me, now that we're so close to the end."

"This is *exactly* the time," Vader thundered. "You are too cautious!"

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“I am a scientist!”

“You are a coward!”

Ry-Gaul cocked his head, listening intently.

“Did you come here just to rant at me? I can contact the Emperor, you know. He might be interested in your...strange urgency.”

Ry-Gaul was now listening intently, his eyes closed.

Suddenly the turbolift shuddered, then reversed.

“What are you doing? You didn’t even touch the sensor...”

“I have done what I came to do. I will be back tomorrow, when I will want to hear a plan to have the memory agent online within the month.”

Trever held onto the turbolift as it zoomed downward. It seemed to be going awfully fast.

“I demand you slow this turbolift down, Lord Vader.” Zan Arbor’s voice shook. “If this is a display of your Force-ability, I hardly need it. I am an expert, you know.”

“The fact that you consider yourself an expert,” Vader said, “only proves how *ignorant* you are.”

The turbolift stopped with a violent jerk, as if it had smashed into ground, not air. The only thing that prevented Trever from tumbling off into the shaft was Ry-Gaul’s strong grip. He heard a scramble below; bodies falling.

“You will hear about this, Lord Vader!” Zan Arbor screeched.

They heard the doors open and the sound of his boots, followed by the scuffling sounds of someone trying to rise, and panting.

“He’s going to pay for that,” Zan Arbor said. “Get this thing moving, Linna. Fast!”

“I think the sensor might be broken—”

“Just do it!”

Ry-Gaul signaled to Trever. Now was the time. Zan Arbor was already off balance from her confrontation with Vader.

Ry-Gaul went first, slipping down into the turbolift in one fluid movement. Trever followed.

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He cannonballed into the space. His job was to protect Linna while Ry-Gaul took care of Zan Arbor. As he landed, his foot tangled in a thick chaughaine cape that Zan Arbor must have left on the floor. He lost his balance and fell. Linna reached out for him.

Zan Arbor took out a small deadly blaster. Linna was now exposed.

The look of triumph in Zan Arbor's eyes was erased when Ry-Gaul charged, his lightsaber held in a defensive posture.

Linna had already leaped forward to protect Trever, pulling something from her med pack. Trever yelled, afraid that the blasterfire would hit her despite Ry-Gaul's lightsaber.

Zan Arbor, her lips drawn back in a smile, peppered Ry-Gaul with blasterfire. Trever hit the ground as the fire ricocheted around the turbolift. Linna hit the floor, too, and Zan Arbor turned, aiming the blaster at her.

Linna reached forward and pressed a delivery syringe full of a blue-gray liquid into Zan Arbor's ankle.

Zan Arbor screamed and dropped her blaster. She writhed, falling to the ground, and beat her head against the floor. She reached for Linna, who drew back.

"No!" Zan Arbor screamed. "No!"

"What did you do?" Trever whispered to Linna.

Ry-Gaul clipped his lightsaber back onto his belt. "She gave her the memory agent."

Linna leaned over Zan Arbor. She spoke clearly and quietly, with no menace in her voice. Only resolve.

"You will never use your brilliance to hurt people again."

Zan Arbor put her hands to her head. "The formula...I'm losing it. Tell it to me!"

Linna was silent. She waved her hand over the sensor and the turbolift began to rise.

"The interactions of chemicals with organic substance...the formula for toxic delivery systems by water..." Zan Arbor began

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to pull at her hair. "It's gone! My experiments! I can't remember them!"

She crashed back against the wall.

"My training! My genius!"

Trever watched as panic raced across her face. "The Bibinger formula!" she screamed. "My work with the transmission of plague element...it's gone! Chemical equations...the amount of weight times gravity times...times..."

"It was a full dose," Linna murmured. "Not targeted. I'm not sure how it will affect her, but I think at the very least she'll lose all her scientific training...fifty years' worth..."

"Who are you?" Zan Arbor suddenly turned to Linna. "I don't know you."

The doors slid open. Linna led her out into the sumptuous apartment.

"I don't know this place!"

"This is your home."

Linna walked over to Zan Arbor's datapad. She slipped it under her arm.

"You did this to me," Zan Arbor said suddenly, looking at Linna. "I remember enough to know I was a genius. Now I'm a nobody! I'm a nobody!"

Linna walked back into the turbolift.

"You might as well have killed me!" Zan Arbor shrieked.

The turbolift doors closed, and they descended. All the way down they heard her screams.

Chapter Fifteen

Hydra contacted Ferus as he was leaving the open-air market. Her voice was curt.

“There’s been a break in the investigation. I discovered there was a weather forecasting satellite overhead on the day in question. The findings include ground photos. They are wiped at the end of each day. So they said. But I went into the computers and found a cache with old information. Found the day in question.”

Ferus felt his heart fall. “That’s good news.”

“Unfortunately whatever the incident was, I can’t locate it. The satellite only covers a portion of the park during the time in question. But I was able to cross-check with airspeeder ID tags. We’ll miss out on those who arrived on foot but if we squeeze the others for names we’ll really be getting somewhere. We’ll have almost everyone who was in the park that day. I can interview all of them.”

This was exactly what he didn’t want to happen.

“I’ll sit in,” he said.

“If you must.”

He got the distinct impression when he disconnected that she was either exasperated at his incompetence or suspected his loyalty. Neither was a good sign.

Jude Watson

Sitting in on interviews with Alderaan citizens with Hydra gave Ferus a close-up look at dignity and fear.

Dignity: The Alderaanians detested them but treated them with courtesy.

Fear: The Alderaanians knew the Inquisitors had the power to throw them in an Imperial prison without trial or charges.

Hydra was good at her job. He watched the way she inspected the dwellings, her gaze lingering on family holo-photos, the way she asked detailed questions about the ages of the children. She held their fear in her hands and squeezed.

The interviews made Ferus feel ill. *I need to stop doing this. I'm not cut out for it.*

The Sith Holocron whispered in his head, in his own voice, *You underestimate your ability to be cruel.*

By the end of the day, Hydra was barely concealing her fury. None of the Alderaanians gave up a single name of anyone they knew at the park. They all claimed that the park was too crowded, they didn't know anyone that day, or maybe they would provide a first name, a common name that would be impossible to trace. Hydra even interviewed the children and drew the same response. It was obvious that the children had been prepared as well as the adults.

It reminded him of the solidarity and courage of the resistance on his homeworld of Bellassa. It made him proud.

Hydra checked her data list at the end of the day. "I can always do a second round of interviews. Maybe start detentions off-planet."

"I don't think this warrants it," Ferus said. "Let me see the list." He checked over the names that Hydra had compiled. "You missed a name," he said. "Sona Ziembra." He would have let it pass, but it wasn't like Hydra to overlook something. Why had she?

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She glanced at it. He saw no expression on her face. "Let's check it out."

Sona Ziemba lived in a large apartment block nearby. The building was in a crowded neighborhood of workers. It was the time of workers going home, of preparations for the evening meal, of the satisfaction of a day well spent, and Ferus felt his own isolation even more keenly as life swirled around him. He was apart from all this now.

There is nothing here for you to miss. Ordinary life is nothing.

No, ordinary life was everything.

You are kidding yourself. Recognize that and begin a more important journey.

His thoughts were so loud he wondered if Hydra could hear them.

They took a turbolift up to the fifty-third floor. They rang the bell at the apartment and a pretty woman answered the door. A dark-haired girl raced behind her, chasing a toy. To his surprise, Ferus recognized them. He'd seen them the very first day. The girl's name was Tula.

The woman's face froze when she saw their Inquisitor's cloaks.

"Sona Ziemba?"

Slowly, the woman nodded. Her eyes darted from Hydra to Ferus.

"I am Imperial Inquisitor Hydra, and this is Head Inquisitor Ferus Olin. We have a few questions for you regarding your presence in Grasslands Park one week ago Thursday."

Hydra walked past her, not waiting for the woman to invite her in. Ferus followed.

"Were you there on that day?"

"I'm there every day." Sona Ziemba swallowed. "With my daughter. My husband and I had a business, and it failed. And my

Jude Watson

mother...she used to take care of Tula, and she died last fall...so I take her there every day....”

Ferus recognized the signs of someone giving more information than needed because they were nervous.

“Did you know about the incident where someone almost fell into the sea when a barrier wall gave way?” Hydra asked.

“I didn’t see it.”

“But you know about it?”

“Some of the mothers and fathers were talking about it, yes. We talk...”

Hydra whipped out her datapad. “Can you give me names?”

A slight hesitation alerted Ferus that the woman was about to lie. “I don’t know their names. Just the other parents. We just chat sometimes. We don’t ask each other’s names.”

Hydra made a notation.

The door opened behind them. A tall, thin man walked in, his arm filled with a basket of food.

Again, Ferus was surprised. He had seen that man the first day at the park, through his electrobinoculars. Now he realized why the shadowy spy looked familiar. They were the same.

“Dartan!” Sona said with relief. “You’re home. These are Imperial Inquisitors. They’re asking about Grasslands...something that happened there.”

“Strictly routine,” Hydra said.

Ferus felt the back of his neck prickle. Hydra had given the man an *It’s all right* signal. She’d hidden it well, but he had seen it. Hydra knew the man was a spy. And Ferus was guessing that the man’s wife did not.

That was why Hydra hadn’t bothered to investigate this woman. There was no need. If Sona Ziembra had known something, she would have told her husband. And it would have gone straight into his report.

Looking around the tiny apartment, Ferus felt a rush of sympathy. This family didn’t have much. The wife had lost her job.

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Dartan put the basket down. Ferus recognized food from the market. Perhaps Dartan worked there.

No doubt he had been corrupted by the idea of wealth for his family. That's how many spies were recruited. *Just keep your eyes and ears open*, the Imperial recruiter would say in a friendly way. *You don't have to betray your neighbors. Just give us bits of information.*

And so the person would pass along something, then another thing, and before he knew it he was compromised. He would be asked to do more and more until he found himself on top of a warehouse building with electrobinoculars trained on the main spaceport. And then there was no turning back.

One day he would realize that he'd betrayed not only his neighbors, but everything he believed in.

Now Ferus knew how it happened. Dartan had been bored with the spaceport, had turned his electrobinoculars down to the park to seek out his wife and daughter...and had seen the incident with Leia. He had reported it because he had nothing else.

"You work at the market?" Ferus asked.

Dartan nodded.

"Have a good evening," Hydra said. "We'll contact you again if we need to."

As they descended to street level, Hydra spoke. "An Imperial Governor will be arriving tomorrow," she said with satisfaction. "Organa forced the Emperor to take a stand here. It was a stupid move to send Antilles fleeing when Lord Vader arrived. Did he think the Empire's reach didn't extend to TerraAsta?" She snorted. "So much for his so-called intellect. Alderaan will soon discover that it can't operate if it doesn't cooperate with us."

Ferus walked out into the soft evening air. His mind buzzed with the information Hydra had just dropped.

Dartan Ziemba couldn't have reported that Raymus Antilles had left Alderaan. He had left secretly. Bail had sent Raymus Antilles to the TerraAsta spaceport in a personal communication in front of only a few trusted people in the palace. Someone

Jude Watson

must have overheard, or have placed a bug in the reception room.

There was another spy on Alderaan.

Only this spy was more dangerous. This spy was at the palace.

Chapter Sixteen

Ferus was in his quarters when the signal appeared on the emergency coded channel. Obi-Wan had surfaced at last.

Ferus felt the balled-up frustration of the past days. He didn't bother greeting Obi-Wan. "You *knew* that Leia Organa was the Force-sensitive child!" he spit out at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan's lined face was impassive. "Ferus—"

"Don't deny it."

"I'm not denying it."

"You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble! Why did you let me fly blind on this case?"

"I didn't tell you for two reasons. One, I wasn't positive it was Leia Organa. And two, if it was her, the only way I'd know how vulnerable she was would be to let you track her."

Ferus shook his head. "I can't even follow that *sentence*, let alone your reasoning."

"I had to know if there was a spy on Alderaan. The only way to know was for you to follow in his or her footsteps...without knowing it."

"Well, let's elect you Minister of Withholding Information, then," Ferus said furiously. "I've been chasing around Aldera like an idiot."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan grinned. Ferus's annoyance grew. That smile of Obi-Wan's—so rare, and then so engaging when it appeared. That hadn't changed.

"Hardly an idiot," Obi-Wan said. "You found out who Leia was. That means she's more vulnerable than I thought. I bet you found the spy who turned her in."

"No thanks to you," Ferus muttered.

"Tell me about Leia," Obi-Wan said unexpectedly. "Is she strong in the Force?"

"It's hard to say," Ferus said. "I didn't pick up anything at first. She definitely has a Force-connection, but without support or training it will likely wither. She will have it, but those around her won't know it. She will be exceptionally quick and bright, perhaps, with fast reflexes. Right now she is vulnerable to being picked up only by another Jedi."

"Or a Sith."

"Or a Sith, yes. As the years pass, this will change."

"Tell me about the spy."

"The spy isn't the problem. My take is that he's a low-level functionary, a spotter. It's clear he's doing it for the money. He has a post overlooking the main spaceport. Probably reports on unusual arrivals and departures. I'm guessing he saw what happened with Leia that morning and reported it because he didn't have anything else to give them. I know he tracked some kind of shipment through the spaceport. But what it is and why, I don't know."

"So what is the problem?"

"There's a mole in the palace. Another spy. Someone close, who Bail trusts."

Obi-Wan let out a breath. "How do you know?"

"Someone reported where Raymus Antilles was going to break his journey at the TerraAsta spaceport. The only ones who knew were Bail's inner circle. A servant could have been listening. He trusts everyone in that place."

"You have to tell him."

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"I'm the enemy, remember? Bail doesn't trust me. I have to help him without him knowing that I'm helping him. I can't keep turning up at the palace for no reason. Unless you have a suggestion." Ferus said this last sentence with a twist of irony. So far, Obi-Wan hadn't been much help.

"I'll talk to Bail," Obi-Wan said. "I'll tell him you're on our side. He'll believe me."

"You're going to let Bail know that you're alive?" Ferus asked, surprised.

"He already knows," Obi-Wan said.

Ferus almost threw the comlink against the wall.

"Is there anything else you're not telling me?" he barked.

"There is a great deal," Obi-Wan said, "but it wouldn't help you to know it."

"So you say."

"Go to the palace," Obi-Wan said. "I'll contact Bail."

His reception this time was completely different. Once they were in private, Bail welcomed him warmly, grasping his shoulder as he shook his hand. "You are doing important work," he said. "Those of us who oppose the Empire owe you a debt."

"You put yourself on the line every day in the Senate," Ferus said. "I should be thanking you."

"Come into my study. We can talk with our friend." Bail ushered Ferus into his study. A hologram of Obi-Wan was waiting there. "I sent everyone out of the palace today at Obi-Wan's request," Bail said. "And I upgraded to highest security in my office. Everything we say will be scrambled, coded, and then erased." He turned to Obi-Wan. "Now, my good friend, tell me why you asked for these things."

"Ferus believes that there is a spy in your household," Obi-Wan said.

"Impossible," Bail answered immediately. "Everyone here is either family or friend. Even the servants."

Jude Watson

“Even if that’s so,” Ferus said, “I heard from Hydra that Imperial security knew beforehand that Raymus Antilles would be landing at TerraAsta. It was not a random stop. He was targeted.”

“But when I gave Antilles that order, there were only Breha and Deara present,” Bail said.

“Someone must have been listening,” Ferus said.

Bail shook his head slowly. “I can’t believe it.”

“You have to believe it,” Obi-Wan said. “You have to set a trap for the spy. To have one that close is dangerous not just to you...”

“But to Leia as well,” Bail said. “Yes, I see that.”

“We have to set a trap,” Ferus said.

Bail nodded his agreement before turning to Obi-Wan. “I’m glad you contacted me. Something has been on my mind. Have you heard of a group called Moonstrike?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “Ferus has done a few favors for the leader, Flame.”

“She contacted me about Alderaan joining the group. Apparently there is to be a first meeting of resistance leaders from planets in the Core. Mon Mothma and I have decided to go very slowly with our resistance efforts. What will be strong must be built with care. But Flame has a different take. Perhaps a better strategy is to strike now, when the Empire is just beginning to consolidate its power. Alderaan is vulnerable. Things are changing so fast. I want to protect my homeworld if I can. If we had alliances willing to help us....” Bail let his voice trail off.

“You are asking my advice?” Obi-Wan asked.

“You are my best counselor,” Bail said warmly.

“Ferus and I no doubt disagree on this issue,” Obi-Wan said after a pause. “A linkage of resistance movements from planet to planet is of course a goal. The question is timing. Most planets are depleted from the Clone Wars. Empty of weapons, empty of spirit. Bellassa is a rare example of a planet that has managed to

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mobilize the will of the people to fight the Empire. Most of the others are just glad for peace and hoping for prosperity. To create a full-out rebellion would be difficult if not impossible. In the meantime those resistance leaders who will be needed later will be exposed. So I would advise you not to join Moonstrike. Waiting is hard—but sometimes it is smarter.”

“You believe so in this case,” Bail said gravely.

“I do.”

Ferus saw that Bail was now wavering. That was unfortunate for Flame. He agreed with her that without a political component Moonstrike could be doomed.

Obi-Wan hadn’t changed Ferus’s mind. It was exactly the opposite. Now he felt more inclined than ever to help Moonstrike.

Chapter Seventeen

Revery appeared, a blue planet with a soft haze of pink clouds. Aquamarine seas were visible in a patchwork of gold and green land. It was as lovely from space as it was reputed to be on the surface. Clive entered their coordinates into the nav panel for the mysterious abode of Eve Yarrow.

“Let’s just hope we escaped detection. Even if by some miracle Bloomi didn’t talk, the report of two bank robbers will be all over the security channel right now.”

“Could be,” Astri said. Her lips quirked upward. “We’ll know soon enough.”

Clive gave her a quick glance. “Hey, you *like* this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Astri bent over to fiddle with her utility belt. Her curly hair hid her face.

“You do!” he crowed.

“That’s an awful thing to say—”

“I’m not saying you like the Empire. Or that you’re glad there was a war so you could go flying through the galaxy with a blaster strapped to your leg. It’s just that...you’re not afraid. You like the adrenaline. You’re the one who got us out of that mess back there. So what gives? I thought you were a politician’s wife, giving teas and running receptions. Were you some kind of spy back before the Clone Wars?”

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"You've got a pretty dumb idea of what a politician's wife does," Astri said, annoyed. "Teas? Receptions? I ran a policy think tank. Until Bog eliminated it after we came up with real solutions to planetary problems."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Before I met Bog—a long time ago—I ran around with the Jedi a bit."

"You ran around with the Jedi? What does that mean?"

"I helped Obi-Wan rescue Qui-Gon. I pretended to be a bounty hunter. Shaved my head. Learned how to shoot a blaster and pilot a swoop. Stuff like that."

"You surprise me, Astri Oddo. Every time I think I know what you're about, you turn out to be about something else."

Astri cocked an eyebrow at him. "That's your flaw, Flax. You don't get it. People aren't about one thing. Now let's keep an eye out. You can't rely on instruments for everything. You need visual sightings. Obi-Wan taught me that."

"I'm guessing there'll be a place to land near the house," Clive said as the surface of the planet grew closer. "Nobody seems to want neighbors."

It was true. Grand estates were tucked into the mountains many kilometers apart, or displayed on wide spectacular beaches with the mountains behind them. No one had a near neighbor. With coves tucked into steep hills, the geography of the planet cooperated with the need for privacy.

They found the estate they were looking for. Unlike the others, it wasn't on a secluded cove, but tucked into the mountains with a view of the sea below. It was almost invisible from the air. It was more modest than the other places they had passed. Tall trees surrounded it and it was built of the same gray stone of the mountain, so it blended into the slope.

"There's a landing platform and a small hangar," Astri said.

"I don't think there's a big welcome mat," Clive said. "Is there a clear space nearby where we can land?"

Jude Watson

Astri studied the nav screen. "Let's try the top of the mountain. We'll have to hike straight down, but at least the cruiser will be hidden."

They found a rocky outcropping to land the cruiser. It was a tough hike down, but they made it to the house, coming down through a steep ravine that left them scratched and bloodied.

Clive trained his electrobinoculars on the hangar. "There aren't any vehicles inside. Not even an airspeeder."

"Let's get closer."

They moved from tree to tree, inspecting the place. It seemed deserted. Still they were reluctant to move out from the shelter of the trees.

"Look, we have to get closer," Astri said. "We can't stay here all day. We have to risk it."

"If someone's here, I'll say we're lost," Clive said.

"That seems far-fetched."

"I can convince anyone of anything."

"No," Astri said. "You just think you can. Come on."

They left the shelter of the trees and entered the compound. There was no security fence. They simply walked in, finding a path made of smooth flat stones. Astri watched the house but saw no flicker of activity visible behind the large windows.

Alert for trouble, they walked up to the door and knocked.

"There's no security screen," Clive muttered. "This is weird."

"Maybe they're so isolated out here they feel protected," Astri said.

"Well, one thing is for sure," Clive said as the minutes ticked away. "Nobody's home." He reached into his utility belt and removed a small item.

"A rusty coin?" Astri asked. "Are you going to bribe your way in?"

"Not just any coin." Clive held it up. "And it isn't rusty. This is a rare coin from the planet Maill, a thousand years old. Only several hundred were made before they discovered that it had a fatal flaw. The king of Maill had a queen whom he loved. She

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had hair, they said, the color of a flaming sunset. He used a special alloy of metals to get exactly that hue. Then they discovered that the coin was useless for trade because it was so malleable. Not only that, when heated just a bit it would expand to fill a space and then harden. Ruined many a minting machine before they cancelled the coin. It's the rarest in the galaxy now."

"That's mildly interesting," Astri said, "but what are you going to do with it?"

Instead of answering, Clive also took an ID security card out of his pocket. "Not a real one, a fake one," he explained. "They use a cheaper plastoid. Works better."

Astri stepped back from the door. Clive warmed the coin in his hands, then slid it into the hinge of the security panel. After a moment he was able to slide in the ID security card. The security panel popped open. He studied the circuitry for a moment, then took a small electronic device out of his pocket, attached it, and pressed a sequence of keys. Astri heard a small electronic beep and the door slid open.

"Okay, I'm impressed," she said, before walking in.

"Mildly?" Clive asked as he followed her. "Or extremely?"

The hallway was dark and cool. Astri moved carefully, trying not to make a sound. Her blaster was in her hand now.

They explored the lower floor. The house was furnished in comfortable style, with sleep couches covered in plush fabrics and colorful rugs on the stone floors. The wide windows took in a view of the sea far below. A protocol droid stood inactive in the hallway near the massive front door. The kitchen was stocked with prepared food in the freezer.

"It's just waiting for a visit," Astri said in a whisper. "You could just walk in the door."

"No dust," Clive said. "I wonder if the housekeeping droids are activated on a timer."

Upstairs was a bedroom and a small office. There was no datapad that they could find.

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There were several white robes and tunics of varying fabrics hanging in the closet. They could have belonged to a male or female. No clothing was in the drawers.

Clive shook his head. "No information here. If this is Eve Yarrow's house, she doesn't use it much. We can't tie her to Flame or even the Empire if there's nothing here to find."

"Let's look downstairs again," Astri suggested. "If something's here, it won't be in the obvious places."

They returned down to the main level. Clive examined the shelves. He gave a low whistle.

He picked up a dark crystal embedded in a polished stone and held it up. "Look at this." The crystal refracted the dim light in the room and sent shadows skittering on the white walls. "It's the Emperor's Favor."

Astri moved closer, examining the crystal. At first it had looked stark and beautiful, but something about it made her shudder.

"A hunk of rare obsolite crystal embedded in stone from Korriban," Clive explained. He put the object back and rubbed his hands on his tunic. "Given to the chosen of the Empire's elite. Heroes of the Clone Wars. Those who do special favors."

"Very interesting," Astri said. "So Eve Yarrow is in the Empire's elite. She's been rewarded for something."

She turned and continued her examination of the room. Suddenly she stopped and looked at the windows and walls. She paced the room, back and forth. "Something's off," she said. "The dimensions of the room. Looking at it from the mountain...there should be another room."

Clive followed her out into the hallway, where Astri pressed her fingers against the wall. "It doesn't make sense," she murmured.

Clive let her explore. Suddenly she crouched down in the hall. She ran her fingers along the wall. She knocked on it. "Here. A hidden room."

Clive joined her. "If you say so. But how do we find it?"

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Astri stepped back. Her eyes roamed over the hallway. Suddenly she sprang forward toward the laser painting of the house that hung on the wall. She tilted it this way and that.

A beam of light shot out from the sun in the painting and hit the opposite wall. Slowly the wall slid back.

“How did you do that?” Clive asked, shaking his head in admiration.

“I heard of using laser paintings as security devices,” Astri said. “It’s a brand-new system. Top secret from Secure Securities. I learned about it when I was slicing into the main BRT computer on Samaria.”

They peered inside the room without entering. It was empty. “A hideout,” Clive guessed.

They walked inside.

“If it’s a hideout, it’s strange that there are no supplies here,” Astri said. “There should be food. And a security panel.”

“It could be a storage room,” Clive said. “Or—”

Suddenly the door slid shut behind them.

He exchanged a glance with Astri. “A trap,” he finished.

Chapter Eighteen

The meeting with Zan Arbor had gone well. Darth Vader congratulated himself on his approach. Obviously the woman needed incentive. That, and a screaming fast ride in an out-of-control turbolift. He had no doubt that tomorrow he would hear a different tune from her.

And soon the space where Padmé lived inside him would be blank.

His plans were coming together.

His comlink signaled. His Master was calling. Vader felt no unease as he accepted the communication. He had news that would please the Emperor.

"I need a report." It was his Master's most severe tone.

"We have made *progress*, my Master," Vader said. "Twilight is ready. Phase One is already in motion."

"*Good. Good.* And Alderaan?"

"The Imperial Governor arrives tomorrow. Our contact assures us that all is in place."

"Then, my young apprentice, return to Alderaan. Your work is there for now."

"Yes, Master." He had to obey, of course. But he would have to find time to corner Zan Arbor again before he left. He wanted to be sure that she would have the memory agent on-line soon.

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Ferus Olin couldn't touch him with a lightsaber. He must not be allowed to touch him with his memories. They were far more dangerous.

Chapter Nineteen

Keets, Curran, and Dex huddled together at the safe house in Thugger's Alley. They had spent hours on communications back and forth between various groups on various planets, trying to reach an agreement for a meeting. Things were far from settled.

"I think we'd better shut down communications, at least for awhile," Dex said. "We've already pushed our limit. Any more and we risk some Imperial scanner picking up increased activity for this sector."

Keets nodded. "I wish—"

Suddenly Dex whipped his repulsorlift chair around. "We've got trouble, my boys," he said.

For a half of a moment they stood transfixed, staring at the security screens. The alley was under attack. Squads of stormtroopers charged through while the air overhead was thick with small-range armed artillery cruisers and swoops.

"They're landing on the roofs," Keets said, swallowing. He couldn't quite believe it was happening. Not yet.

"You know the drill, boys," Dex said. "We've prepared for this day. I'll see you at the tunnel."

Keets and Curran tried not to look at the security screens as they methodically wiped all the datapads and computers. They knew they had only seconds to finish the job. They fused the

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circuitry so that all the communication and storage would be not only inoperable but impossible to trace. It was too late to warn away anyone who might be in the vicinity, but they knew the Imperial presence was so large that the surrounding populace of the Orange District would spread the word quickly.

Dex had gone to wipe his research library, a task that sickened him. He had spent years amassing information, and now it would be gone in a moment. It contained beings and planets and possible scenarios for revolt on different planets as well as information on systems, cities, minerals, mines, out of the way spaceports, cantinas where one could be sure to be left alone. It was too dangerous to download it onto a chip; he knew the likelihood of capture despite all his precautions. At least some of it was in his head.

Months before, Dex had prepared for the move to the Orange District with his usual thoroughness. He had checked the old maps and read the old histories. Then he had blasted with some extremely discreet explosive through his own floor and used sensor equipment to figure out how to tap into an ancient alley that had once intersected with Thugger's Alley. Dex had spent long days down below ground with Oryon the Bothan and whichever stray member of the Erased he could corral for a day's work. They'd managed to dig their way with a converted version of a mole miner, through the rock into what remained of the ancient alley. He knew that they'd never make it out through Thugger's Alley or off the roof. The tunnel would have to save them.

Dex met the others in the hallway, which was already filled with smoke.

"Bad news," Curran said. His forehead was shiny with sweat and his long thick hair had come loose from its metal coil. It lay in tangles down his back.

"They blasted through the roof," Keets explained. His face was gray with dust. "Used too much explosive. The debris blocks

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our access to the turbolift. We'll have to come at it from the other wing of the house."

They all exchanged glances. This was a worst-case scenario, one they hadn't planned for. The only route to escape meant they'd have to take the hallway that ran along the front of the house. They could get caught between the stormtroopers entering from the roof and those entering from the front. They wouldn't stand a chance.

"Let's get moving then," Dex said.

The safe house had been designed to confound pursuers, with false walls and twisting passageways too narrow for major weaponry. Still they could hear the stormtroopers uncomfortably close. They were charging down the hallways behind them and blasting down doors. They could hear them searching the rooms and the muffled sound of their communications.

"If they get through that armored door downstairs in the next minute we could be in trouble," Dex said.

The blast sent shock waves against their ears. The house gave a great shudder and almost seemed to lift up and settle back down.

"They're in," Keets said.

They heard the stormtroopers charging up the stairs. Dex hit a button on his repulsorlift chair.

They heard the sound of scrambling, then bodies hitting the ground. The amplified groans and shouts came to them faintly.

"Flipped the stairs into ramp mode," Dex told them. "It will buy us a minute."

"We need more than a minute," Keets said, drawing his blaster.

One more hallway. One last burst of speed to get to the hidden turbolift.

The stormtroopers behind them were so close they could hear the headset communications now.

Nothing so far.

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Use explosives on the walls. They could be hiding behind them. Not too much this time! The house is unstable.

Continue on northeast quadrant. Meet up with squadron three-six-ten.

Curran turned the last corner and saw stormtroopers spilling up the ramp, climbing over the bodies of their comrades who had fallen when Dex suddenly eliminated the stairs. Curran and Keets let loose with blasterfire. Energy bolts streaked through the smoky air.

The stormtroopers returned fire. Keets dived and rolled, still shooting. His main objective was to protect Dex, who could make that repulsorlift chair travel, but couldn't maneuver it to escape a barrage of blasterfire. Curran kept himself between the stormtroopers and Dex.

"Run, you two! Run!" Dex thundered. "Leave me here! We agreed!"

Weeks before, Dex had told them that if they were invaded, he was the most vulnerable. Because of his bulk, he simply couldn't move fast enough if the worst happened. He had extracted a promise from Keets and Curran that they would escape if they could and leave him behind. He had forced them to agree. It was best if at least a few of them were able to escape. Dex had told them that he'd led a long life, "sometimes a scoundrel's life, but a good one," and he was ready to give up his life if he had to. "But you boys, you have a long way to go," he'd told them.

Yes, they'd given their word. But Keets and Curran knew even without exchanging a glance that they couldn't leave Dex behind.

The blasterfire was so thick that the air seemed full of dancing light. Keets saw a blaster bolt hit Dex, who slumped over. Shouting at Curran to cover him, he leaped on the chair and pushed the velocity. The chair shot forward, straight into an advancing line of stormtroopers.

Screaming with rage, Keets blasted through the line and kept going. Curran hooked an arm around the chair and pulled

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himself onto the back of the chair, which lurched but kept on. Dex was half-conscious as Keets pushed the speed, whizzing down the corridor through the smoke. The last burst of blasterfire hit the repulsorlift engine. They heard a small explosion and the chair began to buck and slow.

Curran threw himself at the hidden panel and activated it. They only had seconds now. The stormtroopers were making their way down the twisting hallway. The panel slid up and Keets pushed the chair inside. Dex's head lolled and his six arms hung limply at his sides. Keets didn't know if he was alive or dead.

Curran hit the sensor. "Close!" he begged the panel.

It shut before the stormtroopers rounded the corner. The turbolift zoomed down. The doors opened on the damp, cool, tunnel.

Pushing and pulling, they got Dex out of the turbolift.

"There's an airspeeder down here we can use," Curran said. "We'll have to leave the chair."

Keets peered at Dex anxiously. Was he...

Dex opened one eye. "You gave me your word," he muttered.

Keets could see the great effort it cost him to speak. He leaned closer to Dex's ear. "Since when is my word worth anything, you monkey lizard? You should have known better."

An explosion above caused the tunnel to shudder, and dirt rained down on them.

Dex winced, but Keets saw the light in his eyes. He would make it. "What are you waiting for then, boys? Get me out of here."

Chapter Twenty

Trever and Ry-Gaul stood back as Linna and Tobin embraced. Linna laid her head along her husband's chest. They had been separated for too long. Trever turned away to give them privacy. He hadn't seen that kind of love since his parents were alive. He didn't like to be reminded. It made an empty place in him that he usually was able to fill up with other things. Friends, food, danger, wondering what his next move would be.

Finally they moved apart. They came toward Ry-Gaul and Trever, holding hands.

"Thank you," Tobin said. Linna smiled. Trever had never realized that she was beautiful. She had always looked so sad and strained.

They had met Tobin on a hidden landing platform close to the Orange District. Surrounded by airspeeders, they huddled together. The thick traffic in the spacelanes overhead was beginning to blink and blur with the first lights of evening.

"There is a space cruiser here for you to use," Ry-Gaul said. "Do you need a safe destination?"

"There's a place we know," Tobin said, with a glance at Linna. "A place we were happy once. On Mila."

Ry-Gaul nodded. "Not too much Imperial activity in that quadrant. I included fresh ID docs in the cruiser."

Jude Watson

"They sent me to Despayre," Tobin said. "They separated all the scientists. We were not allowed to speak to others with different areas of knowledge. I was kept with the structural engineers. But I know there were weapons-delivery technicians and systems scientists. Chemists. It's a huge effort to build...something. Some-thing terrible."

Ry-Gaul nodded. "I'll tell Ferus."

Linna held out her hand. She pressed a small bundle into Ry-Gaul's hand. "I don't want this," she said quietly. "It is the only thing left from that terrible experiment. The documentation and the memory agent itself. Zan Arbor's records have been destroyed, as well as her mind. I suggest you destroy this, too."

Ry-Gaul was the most reserved guy Trever had ever met. It surprised him when Ry-Gaul stepped forward and embraced first Linna, then Tobin. He did it without the awkwardness Trever would expect from him.

"You saved our lives," Linna said. "We'll never forget that."

"You saved mine once," Ry-Gaul said. "We are now bound together by the stars and by the Force. If you need me, I will come."

Ry-Gaul and Trever waited until the star cruiser shot off into the space lane. They stayed even though after a moment they couldn't distinguish the lights of the cruiser from any of the others in the heavy Coruscant traffic.

"I've been saying good-bye an awful lot these days," Trever said. "It never gets easier somehow."

"No," Ry-Gaul said with his customary terseness.

"Well, I think I'm done for awhile," Trever said.

They walked the rest of the way to the Orange District. As they descended in a series of turbolifts to the district, they didn't speak. Sadness hung on both of them.

As they neared the district the turbolifts stopped working. They were usually sabotaged as soon as they were fixed. They walked down ramps and through the narrow alleys and streets toward Thugger's Alley. It was dark now, and the orange-colored

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lights threw deep shadows. As they got closer, Ry-Gaul's pace suddenly quickened.

"The streets are almost empty," he said. "Something's wrong."

Trever had to trot to keep up with him. His heart began to hammer. He could smell something now, and he knew Ry-Gaul could too.

"Smoke," Trever said.

They began to run. They turned the last corner and saw...nothing.

The labyrinth of Thugger's Alley had been destroyed. There was nothing left. Not a wall, not a piece of stone. It had been vaporized. The ground still smoked.

"Dex," Trever croaked. "Keets. Curran..."

"Come," Ry-Gaul said, tugging on Trever's arm. Trever couldn't move.

Ry-Gaul had to lead him away. There was always the danger of spies waiting to see who would turn up.

Expertly Ry-Gaul led him through the back alleys until they reached an area where the accustomed crowds were milling in the cafes and loitering outside noisy, dim restaurants. Trever felt shocked to the core. He put one foot in front of the other but he wasn't aware of walking. With every step a name chimed in his head. Dex. Curran. Keets.

And who else had been there? Flame? Oryon still dropped in from time to time, although he was spending most of his time on the asteroid now. And what about Solace? You never knew where she'd turn up....

"Flame," Ry-Gaul said quietly.

At first Trever was confused. Ry-Gaul just seemed to echo the name in his mind. Then he realized that Ry-Gaul had spotted her.

Relief washed through Trever. They made their way to Flame, who was sitting outside a café, an untouched mug of tea in front of her. Trever saw that her hands were shaking.

Jude Watson

Her face cleared when she saw Trever. "You're safe," she said, rising and hugging him.

"As you are," Ry-Gaul said. His silver-gray eyes rested on her face intently.

"I don't know what happened to the others," she said. "I wasn't there. But...the word on the street is that everyone is dead. They didn't capture anyone. They searched every dwelling and then blew up the whole alley. No one could have survived."

"What do we do now?" Trever asked, trying to swallow his grief and shock, although he knew he wouldn't be able to. It sat like a rock inside his stomach and choked his every breath.

Ry-Gaul sat down heavily in a chair next to Flame. "We go on."

Chapter Twenty-One

Bail still refused to believe that anyone living at the palace could be a spy, but after upgrading his system for the holo-communication with Obi-Wan, he picked up a bug. Someone had invaded his system and placed a monitor on it.

“Luckily it doesn’t appear that my code has been broken...yet,” Bail said. “But the record of who I contact can be just as damaging. I wiped our communication with Obi-Wan, of course, but everything that came before has no doubt been reported.”

“The only other people who knew that Antilles would go through TerraAsta were Queen Breha and Deara,” Ferus said. He hesitated. “Deara...”

“Don’t.” Bail’s voice was curt. “She is closest to us. Breha’s sister. Her loyalty is unquestioned.”

“You said Memily was a new employee,” Ferus said.

“She is the daughter of one of my most trusted friends.”

“Senator Organa, *someone* has to be the spy.”

Bail sighed and said nothing.

“We have to set a trap,” Ferus said. “It’s the only way. Someone here at the palace is passing along information to Dartan Ziembra. Look, I know that you’ve been fighting a losing battle to keep an Imperial Governor off your planet.”

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"I've lost that battle. He arrives tomorrow." Bail shook his head. "Deara tells me that there are some who want me to offer armed resistance. Buy weapons. That would violate everything we stand for."

"I saw Deara at the market at dawn yesterday," Ferus said. "Does she go often?"

Bail crossed and looked out the window. His thoughts seemed far away. He waved a hand. "Lately, yes. She brings back fresh muffins for the children."

Why? Ferus wondered. When Memily was such a good baker?

Ferus thought again of meeting Deara at the market. He had been distracted. Searching for the spy, and thinking about his own use of anger, how he had tapped into the dark side of the Force and what that meant.

He hadn't thought it through.

"I have to go," he told Bail.

"Now? What about setting the trap?"

"If I'm right, I'll come back with a plan," Ferus promised.

Ferus walked through the market. He saw Dartan Ziemba down the first lane of stalls. Dartan sold children's toys. Ferus kept out of sight, watching him. Business wasn't too good.

He kept walking, up and down, watching and looking, pretending to study goods, occasionally buying a thing or two to avoid suspicion. It was a pleasant day and the market was crowded.

When he had discovered what he'd come for, he hurried back to the palace, slashing the airspeeder through the space lanes. There was no time to lose.

He burst into Bail's office. "You must write a secret memo saying that Alderaan will meet the Governor with armed resistance!"

"Why would I do that? Alderaan has no weapons."

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"I'm afraid that you do. Dartan Ziemba was the conduit. Most likely someone from the Empire—I suspect Darth Vader—arranged for a shipment of weapons to arrive at the spaceport. Ziemba was to arrange to hide them and then move them to another location at the right time."

"Where?"

"The open-air market."

"I'm not getting this," Bail said. "Why would Vader want to arm Alderaan?"

"He doesn't. He wants to send the Imperial Governor here and expose the weapons so he has a reason to place your planet under his control."

Bail nodded. "Of course. That is exactly the way he thinks."

"But if you send that message—that you will meet the Governor with armed resistance—it will go to the Emperor himself. They will be delighted that you've fallen in with their plans without even knowing it. You've been told that your people *want* you to fight—"

Bail looked ashen. "By Deara."

"And so they will arrive here with weapons and ships, and they will find...nothing. Because we're going to get those weapons out. You're going to detain Ziemba for questioning and then let him go. Meanwhile, the market will be cleaned of weapons. Then when the Empire arrives they'll meet no resistance. They'll look like fools. The people of Alderaan will be the heroes. And the spy will be discredited. His information will be suspect. Not only his information on you, but his information on Leia."

"That's diabolical," Bail said. "I like it. As long as my people don't get hurt."

"The Empire will bring Star Destroyers to scare you," Ferus said. "But they won't attack."

Bail stood. "Then I have work to do."

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Hydra closed the holofile. She looked at Ferus.

"You intend to submit this?"

"I do," Ferus said.

"You have reached the conclusion that the report of a Force-sensitive child is without foundation?"

"I have."

"Well, I have not reached that conclusion."

"We've conducted dozens of interviews. Combed through official records. Examined the site. Done surveillance. It's clear to me that whatever happened wasn't noteworthy. Not an example of the Force, but a coincidence so unremarkable that...nobody remarked on it."

"There is a reason nobody is talking to us."

"Sure," Ferus said. "They hate us."

Hydra batted her hand at his words as if they were a cloud of tiny flies. "That is immaterial. They're hiding something."

"They are afraid of us," Ferus said. "With good reason. So they aren't going to give us any information. But let's not confuse that with actually having something to say. I say we close the file. I'm your superior," Ferus reminded her.

She hesitated. "Technically that is true."

"Is it true, or not true?" Ferus asked the question brusquely. If he pushed her, Hydra would push back. Her contempt for him would guarantee that.

Because he had to discredit her as well as Dartan Ziemba.

On the way, he'd tried to reach Keets at Thugger's Alley. He wanted Keets to pull in some favors with the renegade journalists who were starting up the Shadow Net, the alternative to the Empire-controlled news. The lack of response from Keets or anyone at the hideout on Thugger's Alley was worrisome.

"It is true." Her mouth set angrily. "And it is also true that in cases where Inquisitors do not agree, the junior member of the team may write a dissenting report."

"Certainly. If you feel you have a solid foundation, despite investigating for four days and coming up empty-handed, then

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feel free to clutter the Imperial archives with another memo.” Ferus shrugged. “Have fun. But I suggest we move onto the next names on the list and really get something done. It’s time to leave Alderaan.”

Hydra’s usually expressionless eyes burned with fury. “I’ll file my report immediately.”

Good, Ferus thought.

“Soon Alderaan will know how fruitless it is to resist,” she said. “They’ll recognize that we’re in charge. Investigations like this will then go smoothly. The Imperial Governor will see to that.”

He wanted to smile at her smugness. Instead he nodded gravely. “Yes,” he said. “I wish for that too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Breha and Bail waited in their sitting room for Deara. Bail looked at his wife's lovely face. He could see the pain there. He had broken her heart.

Her beloved sister was a spy.

He had written the message and put a false "send" on it. He had set the new security control. He had seen with his own eyes on the monitor that Deara had sneaked into his office, copied his message, and sent it off.

He placed his hand over his wife's. The burden of ruling was on Breha every moment of her life. She had loved Bail through many separations where she would remain at the palace and he would be at the Senate on Coruscant. She had encouraged his political career. She had worried about him during the Clone Wars. And even while she ruled her world and watched out for its citizens, she had drawn her family close, had extended a hand to all her family, her friends, down to the last citizen of Alderaan, she was there to fight for them and help them and represent them. Now this.

Deara entered, her face surrounded by thick coils of lustrous dark hair. She had her usual warm smile. "It's a lovely day. How about having lunch in the garden?"

"Deara, we need to speak with you," Breha said.

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Breha's tone made Deara stop short. "Is something wrong?"

"Something is very wrong. There is a spy in the house."

Deara swallowed. "I see."

"You are that spy."

Bail admired how Breha kept her focus. She didn't let one bit of her anguish show.

They didn't know what Deara would do. They had expected her to deny it. But there was no defiance. No argument. Deara merely crumpled. She sank onto the floor, her face in her hands.

No one said anything for long moments. Breha kept her gaze on her sister. "He came to me when I was visiting Coruscant." Deara's voice was muffled.

"Vader?"

Slowly, she nodded. "He threatened me. He was terrifying. Then he said he just wanted...to know when Bail was here, and when he was planning to leave. At first. Then he wanted...more."

"You gave them information about my private communications," Bail said.

She nodded tearfully. "Just who you wrote to, who had sent you messages. Not what was in them."

"Only because you could not break the code."

"No!" she protested, vigorously shaking her head. "I would never have told them that much. I thought the information I gave would be harmless...."

"You told them that Raymus Antilles would be returning through the TerraAsta spaceport," Bail said. "He could have been arrested."

"They had no reason to arrest him," Deara said. "They wanted to discover if he was carrying a message. I knew your code was unbreakable—"

"These are merely excuses for the inexcusable!" Bail thundered, suddenly losing his temper.

Breha shot Bail a look to keep his voice down. They would do this with their dignity intact. "You told us there were those who

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wanted to use weapons against the Empire,” she said. “Was that true?”

Deara shook her head and said through her tears, “I was told to say it. I knew you would discount it! It seemed such a small thing....” She cried harder.

“What about Leia?” Breha asked. “You filed a report about her. Was that a small thing?”

“It wasn’t me! I would never inform on Leia,” Deara insisted. “I would never endanger the children.”

“Deara, don’t you see that you already have?” Breha asked her. “By becoming a spy, you brought danger to this house.”

Deara shook her head tearfully. “My dear sister, there is already danger in this house. Bail’s opposition to the Emperor has placed you there, not me.”

Breha looked at Bail. She knew those words had gone to his heart. It was his greatest fear, that his work in the Senate would one day threaten his family.

“How dare you say that! My husband’s courage fills my heart with pride. He does not bring danger to this house. He brings honor to it. You are the one who brought dishonor and danger here.”

Bail took Breha’s hand and kissed it. She turned to him with tears in her eyes. “Dangerous days,” she said softly. “But we will never, ever lose our resolve.”

A cowed Deara put her hands over her face again. “I’m so sorry.”

“You are weak,” Breha said. “But you are my sister. You must leave the palace forever.”

Deara nodded, her face hidden by her hands.

“We have arranged secret passage for you, and a safehouse on Ankori-7,” Bail said.

She lifted her face, surprised. “I am free to go?”

“Yes,” Breha said. “You are free to go.”

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“You let her go?” Ferus asked, incredulous. “You had an opportunity. She could have fed them more information! You could have used her.”

“She is family,” Breha said.

“At the very least, she deserved prison,” Ferus said.

“She is family,” Breha repeated softly.

“You could be putting yourself in danger,” Ferus said. “They could track her down. They could still use her.”

“If I make a mistake, I’d rather do it on the side of forgiveness,” Bail said.

To this, Ferus had no answer. The Holocron burned inside his tunic and he knew what the voice would say.

It is foolish not to destroy your enemies. Foolish and cowardly.

But Ferus looked with his heart at Bail and Breha, and thought they were among the bravest people he’d ever known.

There was too much heartbreak in the galaxy now. Too many families broken, too many friends torn apart.

What would it be like to never feel heartbreak again? What if you could conquer grief, tamp it down, and never feel the searing heat of it again?

You can.

Ferus felt the heat of the Holocron next to his chest. Suddenly his breath was short. Perspiration broke out all over his body.

All of that, and more, can be yours as easily as saying one word.

Yes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bail and Ferus waited at the spaceport. It was what they had expected, but it was still a terrifying sight to see the inner atmosphere thick with Imperial craft. The Governor's star cruiser was flanked with Imperial fighters.

"I hate this," Bail said, his teeth set.

"Are the reporters in place?" Ferus asked.

Bail nodded. "The Shadow Net will have a simultaneous broadcast of the arrival," he said. "The news will be all over the Core."

"They'll take their time landing for maximum effect," Ferus said. Then he slipped away; it would not benefit either of them for him and Bail to be seen together.

The first ship to land was a transport ship. The stormtroopers poured out, their weapons held high. They lined up in long rows, sunlight glinting on the white plastoid.

All traffic had been halted for the arrival. The Alderaanians at the spaceport were crowded behind the bristling weapons of the stormtroopers.

The Imperial Governor's star cruiser landed.

The ramp descended. Another squad of stormtroopers came trotting down, their weapons extended as if expecting to meet a battle.

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They were followed by a small man in a purple cape—the Imperial Governor. Next to him was Emperor Palpatine. A shudder went through the crowd. From a distance, Ferus could see Bail stiffen. They hadn't expected to see Palpatine himself.

"People of Alderaan," the Governor called out, his voice loud, reaching every person at the spaceport. "We come in peace. We are here to protect you. Word has reached our ears that you are prepared to fight. We do not wish a confrontation. The Empire is about peace."

Bail stepped forward. "The galaxy knows that Alderaan is peaceful. We have no weapons."

The Emperor signaled to his elite Red Guards. "We shall see."

The procession moved to the open-air market below. Customers and vendors ran as the stormtroopers methodically overturned stalls and bins full of items. Fruit was trampled underfoot. The ground was soon stained red from berries.

The stormtroopers uncovered the durasteel bins.

"Open them," the Governor commanded.

The stormtroopers opened every bin in the market. They were filled with tools. Handmade clothes. Fabric. Kitchen items. The stuff of everyday living, nothing more.

The vendors had worked all night to get the weapons out. Raymus Antilles had loaded them aboard his cruiser secretly and took off. Once again, there were no weapons on Alderaan.

The Imperial Governor stood by the Emperor's side, surrounded by hundreds of troops. The market was wrecked. The people stood, watching. Not afraid, Ferus saw. Smiling.

It was the sight of the Emperor surrounded by ruined fruit, by squads of stormtroopers facing off against a threat that consisted of children and ordinary citizens out with their shopping baskets. It was the sight of the Imperial Governor, so slight and small, with his ornate purple cape and bodyguards with raised rifles around him. On Alderaan, the sight did not make sense.

A slow rumble began in the crowd. It started with barely concealed smiles, then erupted into titters and laughter.

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The Imperial Governor looked up at the Emperor nervously. The stormtroopers looked for an order.

“Disperse!” the Governor rasped. “Back to the transports!”

Ferus smiled. So did the Emperor.

He felt the wind stir his cheek. Darth Vader was suddenly beside him.

“I see this amuses you,” he said.

“All of this effort for one little Governor,” Ferus said. “Why the show of force? There’s no resistance on Alderaan.”

“Resistance is everywhere,” Vader said. “It is up to us to decide when and where to crush it. You gave these people a hollow victory.”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“So you say. Their defeat will come. This humiliation will not be forgotten. The Empire chooses its time. Yesterday on Coruscant we became tired of observing a resistance cell right under our noses. So we crushed it.”

“Good for you,” Ferus said, but his anxiety ticked inside him.

“Thugger’s Alley, in the Orange District,” Vader continued. “You might have known the one in charge—he had been friendly with the Jedi. Dexter Jettster, his name was.”

“Was?”

“His hideout was destroyed. Everyone inside was killed.”

Shock and grief tore through him. But now was not the time. It was time to hit Vader back. “When I mentioned Mustafar to you the other day, I fear I upset you.”

The Dark Lord must have been prepared for him to bring it up. He didn’t give off any ripple of concern. “Save your fears for *yourself*,” he said instead.

It happened instantaneously. Ferus felt as though the top of his head had blown off. It was immediate and visceral. Every clue clicked into place, every suspicion, every nagging sense that he was missing something important.

They had stood outside the council room together.

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"I'm afraid for you. You think admitting you were wrong opens you up to attack," Ferus had said. He still felt shell-shocked and strange from his conference with the Jedi Masters. He still couldn't believe that he had just resigned from the Jedi Order.

Anakin's lip had curled. "I think you should save your fears for yourself."

Darth Vader was Anakin Skywalker.

He didn't know *how* he knew it, but he knew it.

Reeling, Ferus stood next to Vader as the Emperor approached them. Clouds had rolled in like a great gray carpet; a storm was brewing. The thickness of the air and the coming storm seemed to give a hard charge to the atmosphere.

Ferus felt the blast of the Emperor's fury, though he remained calm. Palpatine came straight to Vader.

"A trap," he said. He looked over at the people, who were now turning away, and added in a terrifying whisper, "I could kill them all, if I *wanted*."

"There is nothing stopping you, Master," Vader said.

"You should *remember* that we are being monitored. Someday, yes. Not now."

Darth Vader said nothing. Ferus began to enjoy himself. He'd never been present while Vader was rebuked by his Master.

Anakin had always hated being chided in public.

Anakin had always wanted to be the best.

Use it. Use what you know. Bring him down. He is half of what he was.

As if the Emperor had heard the voice as well, he turned to Ferus. The heat left his voice. "But you have done your job *well*," he said.

Ferus felt Vader's frustration build. If Vader unleashed it, Ferus wondered if he could tear the spaceport apart.

The Emperor smiled.

"It is time for you to take a second-in-command, *Lord Vader*," he said, chuckling. "And I think Ferus Olin is perfect for the job."

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

RECKONING

BY JUDE WATSON



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Chapter One

Ferus Olin stood on the vast plains of the planet Kayuk and spoke the words that had haunted him since he'd left Alderaan.

"Darth Vader is Anakin Skywalker."

It had taken days for Obi-Wan Kenobi to get back to him on the emergency channel. Now Ferus stared at the wavering holo-image, waiting for Obi-Wan to react.

Obi-Wan's expression remained neutral. "What makes you think so?"

Ferus gathered his thoughts for the explanation. *Where to start?* Now that he finally had Obi-Wan, he needed to present the mix of facts, guesswork, and instincts that had led him to this revelation.

In that small second of pause, a new revelation rocked him.

"You *knew*!"

Obi-Wan said nothing.

Ferus wanted to fling the comlink up into the vast yellow sky. Instead he walked in a circle, kicking a stone out of his way in his frustration, a display of extremely unJedi-like behavior.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked when he could finally calm himself enough to speak.

"Ferus—"

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“Don’t you think it might have been helpful for me to know?”

“I don’t see why.”

“You don’t see *why*?”

“Ferus,” Obi-Wan continued in the same maddeningly calm voice, “think about it. What difference does it make to know who he was? There’s nothing left of Anakin. He died the day he crossed to the dark side of the Force. It was better for you not to have that information. It could have endangered you. It was enough that I knew.”

The way Obi-Wan spoke stopped Ferus in his tracks. Obviously the pain of it was still a part of Anakin’s former Master. Despite the millions of kilometers between them, the vast expanse of space, Ferus could feel it. He stopped to consider what it would mean, to have an apprentice who would abandon all your teachings and turn to the dark side.

“Why did he do it?” he asked.

“I have my theories,” Obi-Wan said gravely. “We can’t know for certain. I believe Palpatine has been manipulating him for some time. Slowly. Planting seeds. That’s the way the Sith operate. And Anakin himself...” Obi-Wan looked away, gazing at the vast sandy expanse of Tatooine. “To have so many gifts, to be the Chosen One...to be so afraid of loss...” Obi-Wan gazed back at Ferus. “And to have me as a Master. In the end, there were things between us I hadn’t even realized were there. I don’t have the answer to why he turned. I can only ask myself that question, over and over again.”

Ferus blew out a breath. “Is there anything else you’re keeping from me?”

“There are things I can’t discuss,” Obi-Wan said. “Things that maybe I should tell you, after your mission is complete. After you leave the Empire.”

“I’m not part of the Empire!”

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"You are a double agent," Obi-Wan said sharply. "You have contact with the Sith. With the Emperor. Until you leave his influence, you aren't safe."

"I'm not under his influence!" Ferus barked the words, but it took an effort of will not to touch the place inside his tunic where the Sith Holocron lay. The Emperor had given it to him. So far he hadn't accessed it, but he could feel it in the hidden pocket, growing heavier by the day, burning against his skin at night.

It was hard in a holographic transmission to read nuances of expression. Still, it was clear to Ferus that Obi-Wan was concerned.

"Ferus, it's time to leave," Obi-Wan said. "It is past time. I'm sensing a disturbance in you. Leave the Empire. Come to Tatooine. We should meet again and discuss what is best for you."

I don't need your advice. Look where it got you.

The voice rose from his chest and was stopped by his teeth. Lately this voice had appeared in him, and he knew it was tied to the Sith Holocron. He wasn't sure if it was his worst self or something apart from him.

It was as though he were split in two. He felt a yearning in his heart to heed Obi-Wan's call. To go and sit beside a Jedi Master again and feel the calm of his presence. Yet something wild in him was contemptuous of that choice.

He was suddenly afraid of Obi-Wan. There were too many feelings to analyze.

"I can't," he said. "I'm still tracking the list of possible Force-sensitives..."

"You haven't found any. You've investigated the most promising."

"But there are more."

Obi-Wan sighed. "Ferus, the Jedi are dead or hidden."

"I'm trying to help the ones who are alive!"

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"You are trying to regain what you have lost." Obi-Wan said the words gently. "And you should know better than to try for the impossible. Come to Tatooine."

"I want to fight, not talk. I want to stay so I can take down Vader and Palpatine."

"Do you think Palpatine—Lord Sidious—is buying your double game?"

"It's possible that he suspects—"

"He *knows*. He knows exactly what you are doing. The only reason you are still alive is because he *does* know. He has a plan for you. He is nothing if not patient. He plotted for years to destroy us. I don't know why he's playing with you, but he is most certainly playing. It is the way of the Sith, to play beings off against each other, to stir up hatreds and rivalries. Believe me, he is working on you."

"He can't corrupt me."

"The fact that you are so confident is part of his plan. He knows you left the Jedi Order. He knows that you want to be a Jedi again. He will speak to you of the Force, tell you how you can use it. He's already spoken of it, hasn't he?"

"No," Ferus said. A spasm of pain hit him. He'd never lied to Obi-Wan before.

"Come see me," Obi-Wan urged. "Leave the Empire. Your mission on Alderaan is complete."

Ferus felt the same confusion again. A longing to listen, a longing to go. But a tide was stronger, whirling him away.

"I can't," he said.

Chapter Two

After arriving on Coruscant, Ferus left his cruiser at the hangar near the Orange District, the one that was used by those who didn't want to go through official check-in procedures. It was a dank, dark hole of a hangar, but everybody there looked the other way when you arrived. Ferus kept his hood over his face as he took the lift tube down as far as it would go, then walked the remaining distance to the Orange District.

You had to know the way to the Orange District in order to get there. If you stumbled on it by accident, chances were you'd turn around and go the other way. The place was full of glow-lamps turned down to the dimmest setting, twisting alleys, crumbling ramps, seedy cafes, and beings from all over the galaxy trying to stay lost.

It was a perfect place for a secret meeting.

They had to scramble to find a place, however. Dexter Jettster's safe house had been raided by the Empire. Every building in Thugger's Alley had been demolished. Ferus had briefly believed that everyone inside had perished, but Keets had sent word to Oryon that he, Curran, and Dex were safe and in hiding.

That was a relief. But Astri and Clive were still missing. Keets said they'd gone off to check on some bank account on Niro 11,

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and they hadn't been heard from since. Ferus was worried about his friends. In the short time he'd been acting as a double agent, he'd seen the Empire up close. He'd seen their ruthless efficiency. He'd seen how effective their communications were, how streamlined their structure of power. And it seemed Darth Vader was everywhere. He enforced, threatened, and brought down the might of the Empire on those who would defy it.

Ferus had trouble reconciling the Anakin that he'd known with that terrifying figure. He'd had his problems with Anakin, but they'd been the petty rivalries of two boys. He had seen something dark in him, but he'd never considered it to be the kind of darkness that would swallow all of Anakin's goodness.

He'd been thinking for so long that if he could discover Vader's true identity he would be able to use it to defeat him.

Now he wasn't sure.

Memories of Anakin weren't all bad. They had never been friends, but there had been many times that they'd worked well together. He'd admired Anakin. It was impossible not to. Anakin had been the one that all the Padawans had looked up to. He'd had close friends, Tru Veld and Darra Thel-Tanis. How could he have become Vader? How could he have left so much goodness behind?

Ferus found his way through the alleys of the Orange District. Oryon had set up the meeting using an old contact from the Clone Wars. They could use the back room of his shop, but only if they never came back.

Ferus found the small, cluttered structure on one of the side streets that radiated off from the main ramp. He went in and told the owner he was looking for parts for an old CZ droid. The owner didn't even look up, but jerked his thumb toward the back. Ferus knew that the man would deliberately avoid looking at any of the faces of those who came to the meeting. It was better not to know.

Ferus pushed through a battered durasteel door. Oryon stepped forward to greet him. Trever was behind him, relief on

his face. Ferus walked forward and slung an arm around his shoulders.

"I just asked you to do surveillance," he said. "Not the job."

Trever looked crestfallen. Ferus could have kicked himself. He'd meant the remark as a joke. The truth was, he was proud of Trever. He had asked him to determine where Jenna Zan Arbor was living and the extent of her security. Trever had done that and more. He and Ry-Gaul had rescued Linna Naltree, the scientist who had been forced to work with Zan Arbor on her memory drug.

Now he wanted to say not only the right thing, but the perfect thing. Trever had blasted into his life like a lightning storm, unpredictable and intense. He had lost his entire family, and though he had become a street thief and a con, he had also become a hero. He just didn't know it yet.

"You always surprise me," Ferus said, "by doing more than I ask, more than I imagine anyone could do. I depend on you for that."

He could see that his words pleased Trever.

"I wish you could have been there," the boy said. "Ry-Gaul isn't exactly overflowing with conversation."

Ferus grinned. "He's more talkative than he used to be."

Ry-Gaul said from across the room, "Most people talk too much."

Trever shook his head. "Gotta remember about that Jedi hearing."

Ry-Gaul came forward. Ferus noticed that there was affection as well as amusement in his eyes when he glanced at Trever. Ferus hadn't seen that look since Ry-Gaul had an apprentice, Tru Veld.

"I wanted to thank you for rescuing Linna Naltree," Ferus told him. "I always regretted having to leave her with Zan Arbor."

"She's safe now," Ry-Gaul said. "I turned over the memory agent data to Malory Lands for study. I think we should destroy

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it after she has a look at it. It would be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands.”

“I agree.”

“That day when we rescued Linna...” Ry-Gaul hesitated. “This is merely a feeling. But Vader seemed very intent on getting that agent. More than just pressuring her for a weapon the Empire could use. It seemed...personal.”

That was interesting, Ferus thought. What could Anakin have done that he’d want so desperately to forget? Was it connected to why he became a Sith?

Just then Keets and Curran burst in. Everyone was glad to see them. They had narrowly escaped death or capture by the Empire.

“How is Dex?” Trever said, asking the question that was on all of their minds.

“Recovering,” Curran said, passing his small, delicate hands over his furred face. “He was hit by blasterfire, and it took awhile to get him to a safe place to be treated. Malory has come every day, and he’s made incredible progress.”

“He’s already bellowing his lungs out for bantha burgers,” Keets reported.

Ferus inclined his head at Keets to draw him away from the hubbub.

“Do you remember a Jedi called Anakin

Skywalker?” he asked. Before dropping out and becoming part of the Erased, Keets had been a muckraking political journalist. He knew more secrets about Galactic City than anyone.

“Of course. The great hero of the Clone Wars,” Keets said. “He defeated Count Dooku.”

“Did you ever hear any...well, gossip about him? About his personal life?”

“Well, sure. The Senate was my beat, and it’s a very small place despite being gigantic. There was some talk about him and Senator Amidala.”

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“Padmé Amidala?” Ferus was surprised. But then again, he shouldn’t have been. No wonder Obi-Wan had sent him to Naboo.

“I even heard rumors of a secret marriage, but I can’t confirm that. I wasn’t digging into Senators’ personal lives, and I always liked Senator Amidala. She had principles.”

“The official word is that the Jedi killed her, but that can’t be true.”

“I don’t believe it either. But I don’t know how she died. It was at the end of the war, when things were getting confusing.”

“We should talk about the next step for Moonstrike,” Oryon said to the group. “We don’t have this room for long.”

“Before we start the meeting...” Keets said. He and Curran exchanged a glance. “We have something to say. We’ve talked to Dex. The three of us have decided to pull out of Moonstrike. Since we’ve begun working together on the resistance, things have changed. We all believe that the best thing to do is go underground now and wait for a more organized resistance to rise.”

“But don’t you want to be a part of that?” Oryon asked.

Keets nodded. “Of course. But right now we’d only endanger you if we stayed. It’s clear that the Empire knew exactly what it was hitting in that attack. We’ve got to lay low to protect what little organization we have.”

“We’re always available to help,” Curran said. “But we’re going to be searching for a new place to live in the sub-levels.”

The others exchanged glances. Ferus knew they were all thinking the same thing. They’d never expected this. Was it the beginning of an end they couldn’t see?

Quietly, Keets and Curran left them.

“Moonstrike can still go on,” Oryon said. “We gained three new members while you were on Alderaan, Ferus. And Flame is starting to line up some corporations. She had a meeting with the scientists from Samaria and Rosha. They’re eager to meet and

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exchange their technologies to create that super-droid you talked about on Samaria.”

“There’s plenty of good stuff going on,” Trever said. “It’s just hard to feel good when Dex and Keets and Curran aren’t part of it.”

“We still need a place for the meeting,” Oryon went on. “We haven’t been able to agree on where.”

He didn’t say any more than that. But Ferus knew what he wanted.

The success of the first Moonstrike meeting now rested with him. He had a safe place—the secret base on the asteroid. He had almost run through the list of the Force-sensitives. He hadn’t had any success in locating any additional Jedi.

He stood. “All right. Contact the others. Tell them we have a safe place to meet. Offer them Jedi escorts. If we split up the group into three teams, Solace, Ry-Gaul, and I can take them to the asteroid. No one but us will know where they are going. Once we set it all up, we’ll be on comm silence until we get there.”

Oryon nodded. “It’s a good plan. All we need are ships.”

“Flame can help us with that,” Trever said.

“She’s waiting for our signal,” Oryon said. “Let me see if I can get a holo transmission.”

Oryon signaled Flame, and in a few moments she appeared in miniature holo-mode. Ferus quickly told her that he had agreed to let the first Moonstrike meeting take place at his secret base.

“We need ships,” Oryon said. “Fast ones.”

Flame nodded. “I’ll get you ships.”

“It’s not only the ships,” Ferus pointed out. “They’ll have to be registered. We have to go through Imperial checkpoints. With three ships picking up that many beings, the odds of dodging Imperial checks aren’t good.”

Flame thought for a moment. Then she smiled.

“I have an idea,” she said.

Chapter Three

Darth Vader left the Imperial hangar and walked the distance to the Republica Towers. He had been gone longer than he'd wanted, and Zan Arbor had ignored his messages. Once he had the memory agent, he'd slap her in an Imperial prison and see how she liked it.

Things on Alderaan hadn't gone well. The Emperor was displeased with his performance. The Empire had looked foolish when the weapons Vader had planted had disappeared. The Emperor had suggested that after Ferus Olin was through with his mission, he'd be assigned to Vader. Impossible! He wouldn't stand for it. He'd find a way around it.

He knew that his Master was testing him. If he could get rid of his memories, he would be stronger. If Padmé didn't still visit him at night in his dreams, he would be able to rest.

He stopped at the lobby. The desk clerk was visibly shaking when he approached.

"May I assist you, Lord Vader?" the clerk asked.

"Is Jenna Zan Arbor in residence?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, Lord. I mean, yes, she hasn't checked out. She accepts deliveries for food. I'll contact her and announce you—"

"Don't. Just unlock security. I am going up."

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He strode into the turbolift. He could hear the rasp of his breathing as the lift rose. Soon he would have peace. Zan Arbor was a vain, infuriating, pompous harridan, but she was also brilliant. She would save him. And then he would throw her in prison.

The turbolift opened, and he walked toward her rooms. The desk clerk had released the lock. Vader pushed open the door.

She sat curled up on the couch, facing the floor-to-ceiling windows. Outside, air traffic flashed in the crowded space lanes of Imperial City. She didn't turn. The table in front of her held a crowd of teapots and teacups. Tea had spilled and dripped on the floor.

"You have *ignored* my messages."

She still didn't turn. Odd.

He walked closer. He came around so that he could see her face.

Her lips were moving. She didn't turn to look at him. She was talking to herself.

"The formula for the toxin derived from C-tentium is...is...I knew it once, or I think I did...I was born on Moseum, I remember that...I don't remember when I came here...I have bank accounts, somewhere...have to remember where, have to..." She thumped her head several times. "The delivery system for toxins into water is...I once had a septsilk gown that everyone admired..."

She shot toward the table and drank from a teacup. "My favorite tea was tarine." She took another sip. "No, it was hannite. No. Flushberry blossom..."

"What are you doing?" Vader roared.

She looked at him for the first time. "Do I know you? I do, don't I?" She raised her hands in a childlike way. "I can't remember things. But if I think very, very hard I might...do you remember my septsilk gown? Can you tell me what color it was?"

Horried, Vader turned away. He hurried to her bedroom. Her dataport was gone, all her files, her records.

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He stood in the middle of the room and felt his fury build.
Olin was behind this.

His last chance for peace was gone.

Padmé would be with him always. The memory of her softness, her smiles, her horror as he held her with his mind, choking the air from her, wanting her limp, wanting to show her, wanting to *make her pay for her disloyalty...*

Around him, the walls began to crack.

Chapter Four

They had been trapped for two days now, and the morning of the third day they knew they had to get out or they would die.

Clive and Astri had rationed their food and water but they hadn't had much to start with. They had tried everything they knew to escape the small hidden room in the grand estate on Revery, but they were still trapped. Clive had finally met a lock he could not spring.

He could see that Astri was growing weak. He had tried to give her some of his protein pellets and water, but she'd only become furious at him. She sat, her head against the wall. They were trying to conserve energy now.

"What really bugs me is that we still don't know," she said. Her voice crackled with dryness. "If I'm going to die in a small white cube, I'd really like to know why."

"You're not going to die."

She turned her face to him. "You're not afraid."

"Not yet. I'm just mad. At whoever designed this contraption. Why would they want intruders to starve to death?"

Astri shrugged. "We're in a remote area. If you put in alarms, security would take too long to get here. If this is Eve Yarrow's place, she doesn't want anybody to know it's her place, so she doesn't trust anyone."

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“Wait a second,” Clive said. “We’re assuming that this is a trap. What if it’s not?”

“So what is it then?” Astri asked.

“A place for Eve herself to hide,” Clive suggested.

“Hide from who?”

“Anyone. If I’m right about her, she’s playing a dangerous game. If someone comes looking for her, she ducks in here, waits it out.”

“Okay,” Astri said. “But how does that help us? We’re still trapped.”

“It means there’s a way to get out.”

“We’ve gone over every inch of this place. The walls are solid. The ceiling is stone...” Astri’s voice trailed off. Suddenly she slapped her hand on the ground.

“Exactly,” Clive said softly. “For some stupid reason, we didn’t check the floor.”

They both got on their hands and knees and moved over the floor, stone by stone, knocking each one, testing it, rocking it. Nothing seemed amiss.

Astri sat in the middle of the floor, her head in her hands. “If it were me, I’d want a hint,” she said. “There’s a lot of stones in this floor...wait a second. Remember how we got in here in the first place?”

“You saw that painting and tilted it, and the hologram sent a beam of light to the lock. Presto, we were in jail.”

Astri closed her eyes, trying to remember the process. She replayed the scene in her mind. She had tilted the painting, the door had swung open, she’d walked forward...

The beam had entered the small room as she’d walked in. It had been angled down toward the floor....

Astri moved forward. She placed her hand on a rock, smooth and gray like all the others. “This one.” *It would be easy to do*, she thought. There would a release somewhere....

She moved her fingers around the rock, along the mortar that held it in place. There was a jagged edge on one side that fit

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neatly against the mortar. She pressed against the edge. Nothing. She hooked her fingers underneath and found something. A miniature sensor, gray like the rock and embedded in it. She pressed it.

The rock slid upward. It hung in the air, held up by an invisible jet of air.

"Stars and planets, you did it," Clive said.

Astri reached her hand down into the hole the uplifted rock had created. She picked up a small controller that fit in her palm. She held it up to Clive. "This is her way out."

"Be careful—it probably has some kind of a booby trap," Clive said. "If someone else uses it, it could fuse the lock."

She handed it to him. "That's your department."

Clive reached into his utility belt. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he took out a small tool and beamed it at the controller. "She probably has a special code...which I'm going to have to circumvent," he said, working carefully. Astri could see only the top of his dark head.

"Bypass the initial system," he muttered. "Reinstall my own code directly...okay, let's try this."

"What if it doesn't work?"

Clive shrugged. "We're still stuck. Or..."

"Or?"

"Don't know. Poison gas gets released?"

"You had to mention that?"

Grinning, his face filmed with sweat, Clive turned back and cued in the numbers. They heard a click, and the door swung open.

"You're a genius," Astri said, throwing her arms around him.

"About time you recognized it," he said into her curls.

She drew back, embarrassed. They walked out together after Clive had replaced the sensor suite and stone. They still didn't want to leave any evidence of their presence.

"Well, the next step is obvious," Clive said. "Refrigerator raid."

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“Yes, we need food and water,” Astri said. “But after, I—”

She stopped abruptly. They both had heard it. Someone was coming in the back door.

Clive grabbed her arm and pulled her down the hall just as the door was opening. They were racing for the stairs when they heard a voice behind them.

“There’s a blaster aimed at you. Stop.”

“Seems like a good idea to stop,” Clive said to Astri.

“Turn around.”

They met the eyes of a curious creature—small, fine-boned, with pale green skin and tentacles wrapped around her head like a turban. In the instant it took to size her up, Clive decided it would be a bad idea to try to disarm her.

“Care to tell me what you’re doing here?” she asked.

“We’re friends of the owner,” Clive said. “Eve asked us here. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Do I look like I was brought up in Gullible Land?”

Clive shook his head slowly. “Definitely not. I’d peg you for Smart Land, any day of the week.”

She waved the blaster impatiently. “What are you after?”

Astri decided that they might as well tell a partial truth. She could see by the servant’s simple, extensively mended garb and her ancient boots that she must not be paid very well to be a caretaker.

“We think Eve Yarrow might be trying to hurt our friends,” Astri said. “So we broke in, looking for information.”

“If you let us go, we’ll make it worth your while,” Clive added. The caretaker hadn’t tried to defend Eve Yarrow. That told him everything he needed to know.

The caretaker lowered her blaster. “Well, why didn’t you say so? I’m no friend of the Empire.”

Relief coursed through Clive. It wasn’t often he caught a break like this one.

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"I'm just an employee," she said. "As long as you don't track mud on the floor, I don't care. I just came to prepare the house for a visit."

"Is she coming?"

"So she says. And she'll have a visitor." The caretaker looked off to the security monitor. "Looks like he's arrived."

"Do you know who it is?" Astri asked.

"See for yourself." The caretaker waved at the monitor. The cockpit canopy was open and a tall figure in black was striding away from a sleek cruiser.

Darth Vader.

"I think it's safe to say," Clive said, swallowing, "that Eve Yarrow is working with the Empire."

"There's a door off the kitchen that leads to a service alley," the caretaker said. "If you leave now, you can take a back path up the cliff. You can't see it from the house."

Clive and Astri exchanged glances. This was their chance to finally find out what they were looking for.

"We're staying," Astri said.

Chapter Five

The laserlights flashed through the gloom of a rainy afternoon: GALACTIC LUXURY STARSHIP MANUFACTURERS' CONVENTION.

The convention was renowned among the elite of the galaxy, an annual trade show that gave previews of prototypes and new models of personal crafts. Luxury models could be ordered before they hit showroom floors, and the wealthiest competed to see who could get the fantastically expensive ships first.

Flame met Solace, Trever, and Ry-Gaul by the VIP entrance. Ferus was joining them at the hangar. Now that he was a double agent, it was better for him to keep a low profile. Flame handed out identity tags. "This will get you into all restricted areas," she told them. "We can take off from the hangar here. The salesmen are authorized to push through temporary ship registries on the spot."

"But we'll still need background checks, won't we?" Trever asked.

"They'll forgo the background checks with the right incentives," Flame replied. "The galaxy hasn't changed that much...yet. The rich get what they want. Just follow my lead. I've already checked out the displays, and I've picked out our new transports."

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They affixed their identity tags to their tunics and walked inside the vast space. Trever swallowed. He didn't know where to start. Every luxury brand was here, and his eyes were dazzled by chromium hulls and rainbow-hued viewports and laser-baked paintwork. Cockpit hulls and bay doors were open wide and invited glimpses of plush upholstery in sumptuous lounges and cockpits with top-of-the-line steering and propulsion controls. Then there were the observation levels with multilevel seating and the next generation of service droids and servant droids and protocol droids. He turned in a circle, overwhelmed.

"Focus, kiddo," Flame said to him with a grin. "We've got a job to do."

Flame led them through the convention. Most of the attendees were dressed in the opulent capes and towering headdresses that were quickly becoming the mark of high style for the wealthy in the galaxy. They threaded their way past the crowds lined up to climb aboard the newest models, to a corner where a smaller distributor had set up. SLEEKER SYSTEMS: THE HIGHEST RANKING, THE MOST PERSONAL SERVICE, the distributor's banner read.

Flame drew their group closer. "I researched this company. They're new and aren't big, but they have prime technology, and they're trying to crack the market cornered by the big guys. They'll be more willing to make a deal. I've already set up the appointment. I said we were a small company with offices on different planets in the Core. We need some fast luxury ships."

They approached the salesman, a short, impeccably dressed young man in a well-cut dark tunic. His hair was carefully styled in points around his head. Trever saw the eagerness in his eyes as they approached. He was clearly hoping for a big sale.

Flame briefly explained who they were and what they needed. The salesman swept his arm to indicate the prototypes behind him. "You're welcome to climb aboard and take a look. Sit in the pilot seat of these babies. I guarantee I'm going to have to pry you out of there with a servodriver. We've got the highest system

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specs in the business. Hyperdrives on all models, twin ion engines. But do we scrimp on luxury? No sir. Corellian leather and conform seating, the deepest plush levels in the industry.”

Trever didn’t need urging. He strode up the ramp and slid into the pilot seat. He checked out the console. Sweet. Major power, full-screen nav devices, and great visibility.

Ry-Gaul climbed down into the engine well. Solace crouched to examine the under-console. “I could install some laser cannons without too much trouble,” she muttered. “But it would take too long. The best we can do is rely on what they’ve got and just fly fast.”

Trever looked out the viewport. Flame was talking to the salesman. He was shaking his head. It didn’t look good.

“Looks like she could use some help,” he said to Solace.

Solace and Ry-Gaul headed down the ramp. Trever trailed after them.

As they came up, the salesman was shaking his head through a wide smile. “Love to help you. Love to accommodate you. I can’t. I need the prototypes here to sell. You can see that, right? Can’t sell the ships if the public can’t see them, am I right? I can get you ships in two weeks. A month, tops.”

“But I’m telling you, if we can buy two ships today, I’m authorized to place a very large order,” Flame said. “When we get back, if we like them. Fifteen, at the minimum. Maybe twenty. And after all, we have to see how the ships maneuver.”

“We have a flight simulator right here,” the salesman said.

Ry-Gaul moved forward and waved his hand in the air. “But we look reliable, so go ahead.”

“But you look reliable, so go ahead,” the salesman said.

“You’ll need the ship registries,” Solace said. “I’ll push them through.”

“You’ll need the registries. I’d better push them through.”

The salesman disappeared inside his temporary office.

“So far, so good,” Flame murmured. “We’ll be able to take off right out of the hangar here.”

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"The danger is after we're away," Solace said. "He'll have to explain to his boss why he let the prototypes go. We have to hope they don't rescind those registries."

"Or that the Empire doesn't check them over," Ry-Gaul said.

The salesman came out of the office, his hands full of durasheets. "The credit transfer went through, so you're good to go. These are your hard copies, and the ships have been coded with your registry numbers. I applied for temporary registration, and it was approved. So all you have to do is register on your homeworld when you get there. You're authorized to fly there by a direct route, but not outside the Core. So no joyrides, ha ha. Great doing business with you. Use the manual mode to steer out to the hangar. You're cleared for takeoff."

"Thank you," Flame said, turning on her most charming smile. "You're a great salesman."

"Tell my boss!"

"Will do!"

With a final cheerful wave, Flame headed for the ships.

Solace slid into the pilot seat of one, Ry-Gaul into the other. Trever and Flame climbed aboard as passengers on Solace's ship.

The hangar was adjacent to the cruisers. They powered up the engines and rolled forward. The security check lay ahead.

"There are Imperial guards at the security check," Solace observed.

"It's all right," Flame said. "They're just there for show. They're not going to stop the richest beings in the galaxy."

Trever felt his heart tripping against his chest.

The officers waved them through.

Ry-Gaul shot out into the space lane. Solace followed. They all breathed a little easier as they left the convention center behind.

They flew through the space lanes and dropped down hundreds of levels, zooming toward the hangar near the Orange District. Solace nodded approvingly as the ship maneuvered through traffic. "Good feel on the helm," she said.

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At the hangar, they landed the ships and disembarked. Ferus was waiting. He whistled when he saw what they'd brought.

"You sure know how to pick a ride," he said admiringly to Flame.

Now, along with Flame's ultra sleek cruiser, they had three fast ships.

"Leaving the Core with a temporary registry is a minor infraction," Flame said. "But we should try to avoid unnecessary stops."

"Each ship can hold about thirty passengers," Solace said. "We've broken down the resistance leaders who are coming into groups of three. Most of them can get off-world to central locations. We've got sixty leaders, so we've got plenty of room."

They each took a third of the list. Ferus checked his over. He'd only have to stop twice in the Core before heading to the asteroid. It seemed like a piece of juju-cake. But anything could go wrong.

The three Jedi would split up so each would be on one ship. Ry-Gaul volunteered to ride with Flame on her cruiser. They had the most stops to make. Trever would go with Ferus.

"As of now, we're on comm silence," Ferus said. "Any emergency transmissions should go through Toma at the base. May the Force be with us all."

Chapter Six

It was like old times, Trever thought. He and Ferus were zooming around the galaxy together, avoiding the Empire. So far, they hadn't run into any trouble. They stayed in the Core, and their ship registry was passing every Imperial control. Their ship was now full of passengers anxious to arrive at the meeting place.

Things hadn't gone this right in *ages*.

As usual, Ferus read his mind, the Jedi spook.

"Don't get overconfident," Ferus told him in a low tone. "We still have a long way to go."

It was definitely good to see Wil again. Wil managed to smuggle himself out of Bellassa and came to the nearby station of Telepan. He was the last one aboard, clapping Ferus on the shoulder with great affection. Wil and Ferus had been among the original Eleven, the famed resistance group on Bellassa that now numbered in the thousands.

"Amie didn't want to join you?" Ferus asked.

"I left her in charge back in Ussa," Wil said. "I'll miss her, but we have some operations going that need her expertise."

The resistance leaders stayed in the luxurious salon, their heads together as they spoke of strategies and plans. Trever stayed in the cockpit with Ferus. He noted a change in him. Even through danger and chaos, Ferus had kept his sense of humor.

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But now there was a grimness to his mouth, and often his gaze was faraway. Was it his grief over the loss of his partner, Roan, or was something else going on? Trever couldn't figure it out. For the first time since he'd met Ferus, he was afraid to challenge him.

A dark shadow hung on him like an old coat. Trever wished Ferus would just shrug it off.

"So," Trever tried, "how's the double agent business these days? Are you going to quit soon?"

Ferus gritted his teeth. "That's the plan."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Trever asked. "You investigated all the Force-sensitives and didn't come up with a Jedi, right? Seems like time to check out."

Something in Ferus shut down. Trever didn't have to be Force-sensitive to feel it.

"It's not that simple," Ferus muttered. "Time to jump to hyperspeed." He keyed in the jump coordinates.

Suddenly a warning systems light on the console started to blink.

Ferus leaned forward. "What's this? The hyperdrive shows a malfunction."

"It's brand-new," Trever said. "Maybe it's just the indicator. I'll do a systems check." A moment later he called out, "It's the transpasitor. I'm getting a failure reading."

"Take over the conn," Ferus said tersely.

He made his way out of the cockpit toward the engines. When he came out, he was covered in grease. "This is the transpasitor," he said, holding the fist-sized part. "I don't get it. Without this we can't risk hyperspeed. We're going to have to land and replace it. At least it's an easy repair. I can do it myself." He strode over to the nav computer and flicked through the star maps. "We're deep in Imperial territory here. Not only that, we're outside of the Core. It couldn't happen at a worse place. We're going to have to land at Hallitron-7."

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Suddenly Wil loomed in the doorway of the cockpit. “Hallitron? There are three garrisons there. The spaceport is a main takeoff point for Imperial ships! What’s going on?”

“We have no choice,” Ferus said. “The transpasitor is out. Look, if they don’t double check the registry, we’ll be all right. You all stay aboard. I’ll get the part and fix it. It’s a basic repair; it should only take a few hours.”

“We’re landing?” One of the resistance leaders, Boar Benu, came into the cockpit. His hooded dark eyes were anxious. “We were supposed to head straight to the secret base.”

“Engine trouble,” Ferus said.

“Engine trouble? Wasn’t the ship checked out before we left? This is sloppy! If I ran a resistance movement in this fashion, I’d be in an Imperial jail!”

Ferus couldn’t argue with him. He was right. They’d done a systems check on the engine but you couldn’t catch everything. The transpasitor had failed mid-flight. “We’re going to have to set down. Let’s accept it and keep calm.”

With an angry look, Boar Benu retreated to the cabin. Wil looked at Ferus. “We’re all jumpy,” he said. “We don’t want anything to go wrong.”

“Something always goes wrong,” Ferus said. “The trick is fixing it.”

Ferus called in the registry, and they were cleared to land and given the berth coordinates. Trever swallowed when he saw the line of Imperial ships. Starships, cruisers, TIE fighters, a capital ship, and stormtroopers everywhere.

“This is one crazy new moon day,” he whispered. “Bad luck would be *good* luck compared to this.”

“It’s okay,” Ferus said steadily. “We can do this. I’ll just wheel us into the hangar, and we’ll keep a low profile.”

He slid the cruiser into a slot. The resistance leaders looked up as he poked his head in the cabin.

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"We've taken a vote," Boar Benu said. "If you don't return and the ship isn't fixed in one hour, we're all splitting up and finding transport back to our own worlds."

How dare you defy me?

There was that voice again. Ferus kept his breathing even.

"That's more dangerous than waiting," he protested.

"We've had to scramble before," Boar said. "That doesn't worry us. Sitting here and waiting to be arrested is worse."

"I'll get you off the planet in an hour," Ferus said.

"We should act as normally as possible," Boar said. "My suggestion is that we head for the cantina, as though this were a routine stop for repairs."

"I think you should stay aboard," Ferus said. "You'll attract less attention that way."

"If they check that registry and find out it's temporary we'll be in trouble," Boar said. "We'd rather be in a position to jump on a passenger ship if we have to."

Ferus inclined his head. He couldn't tell them what to do, unfortunately.

Wil caught up to him as he was leaving the craft. "I tried to reason with them. Boar has spooked them. He doesn't trust you."

Trever said, "He's pretty jittery for a resistance leader."

"I don't blame him," Ferus said. "There's a lot to be jittery about. But we've gone through too much to have everything fall apart now. If I'm not back in an hour, steal a ship and take off."

Ferus strode through the hangar, heading for the bank of turbolifts that led to the surface of the planet. He counted on there being plenty of repair shops close to the busy spaceport. That was a given. But he also had to find a place where questions weren't asked. Luckily, places that sold parts were usually that way.

As the turbolift dropped, Ferus felt the motion as though he were free-falling. He once again had the sense that his mind was dividing. It was happening more frequently now. Several times

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on the trip he had to restrain himself from telling Trever brusquely to stop asking questions. He remembered a time not long ago when he'd enjoyed Trever's talk. He had known it sprang from a combination of youth and nervousness and affection, and had joined in with the boy's banter. Now it just made his brain explode.

When Boar had told him that they had taken a vote to leave if he didn't succeed, he had felt fury out of proportion to the decision. The anger had been startling.

The turbolift doors opened. Ferus felt the breeze on his damp neck. The feelings were caused by the Sith Holocron, he knew. The trick was not to be intimidated by them. If he was going to learn how to draw power from the dark side of the Force, then he was going to have to navigate some bumpy waters.

When Wil had touched his arm as he was leaving, Ferus has also experienced a flare of anger. For a moment, Wil had seemed like a shadow, and Ferus had looked at Wil and Trever as though they were behind a screen. He had felt no emotion for them except anger.

It wasn't him. It wasn't him at all.

Of course it is you.

Recognize it and begin the journey to what you can be.

You are learning that others just impede your progress.

Chapter Seven

Clive and Astri were well-hidden, but when Darth Vader entered, Clive wondered if they really were as secure as he thought. They had ducked into the bedroom. If Vader came upstairs, they would be able to slip out the window and jump down to the soft ground below.

They could hear him questioning the servant, his voice terse and his usual deep monotone full of annoyance.

“She was supposed to meet me here. Are you telling me she’s not coming?”

“I don’t know, Lord Vader. She contacted me yesterday and told me to ready the house. She didn’t say when she’d arrive. She doesn’t give me her schedule.”

A long silence stretched out for a moment that must have terrified the servant.

“Go about your duties, then,” Vader said.

Clive put his eye to the crack in the door. The servant scurried off to the other wing of the house. Vader activated his comlink.

“Yarrow is *not* here,” he said. “No message here for me, either.”

Clive couldn’t see the holo-image, but he recognized Emperor Palpatine’s voice. “Are you telling me that Twilight must be cancelled?”

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"It is already in play. It is time to awaken our mole. Then I will check the emergency drop."

"Nothing had better go wrong this time," the Emperor said.

"I am proceeding..." Vader's footsteps sounded, the clack of his boots on stones, and Clive kept missing words. "... Bepin system...Coruscant." The footsteps paused. "The preliminary weapon will be tested and Twilight will come to a close."

Clive couldn't hear the Emperor's response. He heard the sound of Vader's boots again. With relief, he recognized the sound of the front door opening. Astri let out the breath she'd been holding.

The door didn't close.

Vader was standing there. Waiting.

The servant's footsteps came down the hall. "Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"Has anyone come to visit here besides me?"

"No visitors here. I mean, aside from herself. She got this place for peace and quiet, she told me, so there's never any visitors here. Oh, except for yourself, Lord Vader. And me, I suppose, though I'm not a visitor, technically—"

Vader must have grown impatient of the servant's bumbling manner. Clive heard his footsteps on the gravel.

Moments later an agitated caretaker opened the bedroom door. "He's taken off. You'd better be going. Do me a favor." She thrust a bag of food into their hands. "Don't come back."

"Don't worry," Clive said. "We won't."

The way back to their craft was slower than the way down. They hiked up the steep, overgrown trail, occasionally having to scale sheer rocky cliffs.

"I couldn't tell what all that was about," Astri said. "But I know we got some crucial nuggets of information."

"Twilight again," Clive said. "We've got to contact Ferus. We've got pieces of the puzzle, maybe he can put it together."

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As soon as they got to the ship, they tried to contact Ferus. No luck. Solace, Ry-Gaul, Dexter's safe house...no answer anywhere.

"Strange," Clive said. "I don't like this."

"We're going to have to try Toma at the base," Astri said. "I know we're only supposed to do that in an emergency, but this qualifies."

Luckily they were able to get through. Toma's voice was faint but distinct.

"They're all on comm silence," he said. "They picked up some new ships at the Galactic Luxury Cruiser Convention, and they're all heading here. And the safe house is gone. Dex, Curran, and Keets are in hiding. That's all I know."

Something pinged inside Clive's head, an *a-ha!* memory. It flashed fully formed into his brain. At last he remembered what he'd been struggling to recall.

"The Galactic Luxury Cruiser Convention!" he said. "That's where I saw her!"

"Eve?" Astri asked.

"Flame! She is Eve Yarrow! I always knew she looked familiar. And that time she was wounded on Bellassa and I saw her lying down, with her eyes closed—she looked really familiar. I was there at the convention—maybe five years ago—and Eve Yarrow got hit accidentally by a prototype airspeeder that went hairy. She was knocked out for a minute—it caused all kinds of commotion. I helped her up. I remember her now—the hair is different—but it's Flame!"

"And Vader was just here for a meeting with Eve Yarrow." Astri looked stricken. "Flame is an Imperial agent!"

Toma's voice crackled from the comm. "Are you still there?"

Clive leaned in and spoke urgently. "You must tell Ferus to contact us," Clive said. "He must delay the meeting. Flame is an enemy agent. Don't bring anyone to the base." They were losing the connection now. "Do you read me? Flame is an agent of the Empire!"

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To his relief, Toma's voice came through. "I read you. Flame is the enemy. The storm's intensifying—I'm going to lose the signal, but I'll keep trying. Don't worry."

As the communication ended, Clive turned to Astri. "The guy must be kidding. Worrying is all I do."

Vader set the coordinates and settled in for the trip back to Coruscant. He would let his fury leave him now, but he would recall it when he saw Eve again. This operation was in jeopardy, and it could not fail.

The comm unit blinked, and he saw it was from a high-ranking member of the Security Corps. He had enlisted him to monitor reports over the security channel for certain areas he was keeping an eye on.

"Lord Vader, something has come up in the Niro 11 segment."

"What is it?"

"Just a routine police matter, sir, but—"

"Do not interpret it for me," Vader spit out. "Just tell me what it is."

"The theft of a space cruiser. A human man and woman entered the bank posing as a wealthy couple. We believe their purpose was to rob an account until security showed up to do a routine check. They left and stole the cruiser of a bank employee named...Herk Bloomi."

"They escaped?"

"It wasn't clear at the time that they were criminals."

"Do we know what account they were attempting to infiltrate?"

"I don't have that information, sir. According to Bloomi, they hadn't gotten far enough in their scam."

"I want Bloomi under interrogation *now*. Make sure he is telling the truth. Do you have the cruiser's registry numbers?"

"Of course. It's been reported as stolen."

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“Put it through the highest security search. I want that ship.” Vader closed the communication. It could mean nothing—but he didn’t like the coincidence. Eve Yarrow’s accounts were on Niro 11. And just now, he’d felt something was amiss at her retreat.

Someone was on Eve Yarrow’s tail.

He activated the comm unit again. In a moment, Hydra’s hologram shimmered. “I am at your service, Lord Vader.”

“Where is Olin?”

“We completed our investigations, and he went back to Coruscant to receive our next orders.”

“Have you heard from him since he returned?”

“No, Lord Vader. I am scheduled to meet with him after I tie up some loose ends here.”

“Forget your orders. I need you to track this ship.” Vader recited the registry numbers. “Detain the ship and arrest whoever is aboard. Give this your highest priority.”

“Yes, Lord Vader.”

“This is your last chance to redeem yourself. Things on Alderaan did not go well. Contact me when it is done. Then I might have need of you again.”

Vader blasted into hyperspace. He had to return to Coruscant.

Chapter Eight

Ferus bypassed the parts stores that advertised their gleaming wares in organized rows on ramps that brought your order seconds after you keyed it in. He was looking for an older shop, a little cluttered, that wasn't doing so well and would be glad for the business. He found it about a half a kilometer from the spaceport, in a rundown area that had seen better days. He passed a droid repair shop, a messenger service, and a takeout tea shop. Then he saw it—a grimy laser sign blinking TUTEN'S STARS IP REPAIRS. He figured if a repair shop couldn't be bothered to repair its own sign, it would be a safe bet that the people inside would help him without asking too many questions.

He entered the shop. A humanoid male came out from behind a battered desk heaped with oily parts. His thick-fingered hands were black with grease. Even his cranial crown was black and oily, looking more like a spare part of a ship than a part of his body. Ferus recognized him as a Koorivar. He had heard that there were plans to shift many non-human species out of the Core Worlds and move them farther out among the Mid-Rim worlds. He imagined that this proprietor wouldn't be a fan of the Emperor.

"Tuten at your service," the Koorivar said. "We have everything you need, everything guaranteed."

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Ferus looked around the cluttered shop. He wondered how Tuten could find anything here. "I need a transpasitor."

"Not a problem, I have many over here. I always keep many models in stock. Let me show you and you can choose." Tuten led Ferus over to a wallful of drawers, some huge, some tiny. Spilling out of them were various tools and parts. Ferus kicked through a pile of greasy rags to get to the drawer. He was beginning to regret his decision to come here. What if the parts were defective?

As if Tuten had caught his thought, he pulled open the door with a flourish. "What the others don't understand is, grease makes these parts work. You slip them right into your engine, power up, and they hum like babies. Look. I only procure the best for my customers."

Ferus scanned the parts. He wasn't an expert, but he knew engines. These parts looked in good shape. He ran his fingers along the transpasitor, searching for the telltale seam that would mean it had been re-welded.

"No re-welded parts in this drawer. Only the best. Did you come through a magnetic storm on the way here? Because that can make them go wonky if they're not calibrated just so by a good mechanic, not a smidge off because if not...poof, bam, smoke, and you're in trouble. These new models with the twin ion engines, very fancy, right? But they don't tell you about that, do they?"

"I'll take this one."

"Excellent choice. Discerning customer. I like that." Tuten smiled, and Ferus wished he hadn't. His teeth were as black as his cranial crown.

Ferus followed him back to his cluttered desk. Tuten reached under and fished out a battered datapad from the pile. "Okay, just the routine questions. ID registry number of ship?"

Ferus knew this was coming. The Empire was trying out a new policy at major spaceports, forcing parts dealers to obtain ship registry numbers for major parts requests. It was just

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another way to keep up with ships going in and out, just another regulation, just another tax.

And just another way for the Empire to track his ship.

He leaned over the counter, holding credits in his hand. "Do we really need to do this? It's such a small part. It would fit in my pocket, and I could walk out of here."

"True, true. And regulations are so...pushy. What a bunch of meddlers, those officials are."

"All that paperwork for just a transpasitor."

Tuten eyed the credits. "Transpasitors are expensive..."

"Getting more expensive all the time." Ferus added more credits to the pile.

Tuten grabbed them. "Now, since we've made such a nice deal, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll throw in a re-welded one as a backup. Then you tell everyone you know to come to Tuten's, to get the best deal in the Mid-Rim. Hang on."

Tuten disappeared into the back storeroom. Ferus put the transpasitor in his pocket. He waited a moment, and then another.

And then he got a very uneasy feeling.

Maybe it was time to go.

He looked out the dusty front window. Two stormtroopers were pulling up in a landspeeder.

Ferus vaulted over the counter and ran into the back. Tuten had wedged himself between two towering piles of junk and was trying to look invisible. His eyes widened when he saw Ferus. "Sorry!" he whispered. "They threatened to close my shop if I don't inform! Anybody who doesn't want me to give the registry numbers, I have to tell. Sorry!"

Ferus ignored him and headed for the back exit. He entered the back alley just as one of the stormtroopers rounded the corner, blaster in hand. Ferus leaped, avoiding the blaster fire that struck the door, leaving it a smoking wreck. He ran along the top of the wall and then leaped onto the next roof, blasterfire streaking the air behind him. He could feel the heat at his back.

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This wasn't good. He meant to just slip in and out, fix the ship, and be off. Now he had stormtroopers on his tail, and he couldn't lead them back to the spaceport.

Ferus leaped down from the roof into the next alley. He saw that a maze of alleys ran behind all the shops, connecting them to a utility lane on one side.

One of the skills he'd learned as a Jedi was a practical one—Jedi didn't get lost. He'd had enough memory drills at the Temple, exercises called "urban pursuit" in which he'd had to memorize a map of a large city in a matter of minutes and then plot an escape route in a matter of seconds, following a trial run through the streets of a quadrant of Galactic City.

So a twisting maze of alleys shouldn't have been a problem.

He had an advantage. He was on foot, and the stormtroopers were in a landspeeder. What they gained in speed they lost in maneuverability on the narrow passageways, some barely wider than his shoulders. He ran, dodging garbage and the occasional surprised proprietor leaning against his or her back stoop. In his mind he kept the location of the spaceport firmly fixed, even as he turned left, right, then left again in a series of twists and switchbacks. Sometimes he could hear the hum of the landspeeder's repulsorlift engine but he would double back and dodge behind a convenient heap of parts or garbage and the noise would grow fainter.

Things would have been fine—well, not fine, but doable—if he hadn't run out of alleyways. And if he hadn't heard the doubling, then tripling, of engine noise. Airspeeders now, capable of flying over the alleyways. They'd sent in reinforcements.

Ferus knew now that he'd eventually be cornered. He couldn't outrun this amount of Imperial support.

He could hear the noise of the engines as they circled, waiting for him to emerge. He would be spotted as soon as he did. The landspeeder was in the next alley, searching for him, hoping to drive him out.

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He contacted Trever on his comlink. The boy sounded relieved when he heard his voice.

“Did you get the transpasitor?” Trever asked.

“Got it.”

“Good. Is everything okay?”

“Great,” Ferus said, wincing as another airspeeder buzzed overhead. “Where are our passengers?”

“They went to the cantina. Wil and I are on the ship, but we’re about to follow.”

Ferus thought quickly. “All right. Find tables on the terrace, the one nearest to the runway. And watch for me. When I give the signal, get everyone aboard.”

“Okay, got it,” Trever said. “We’ll be ready.”

Ferus doubled back down the end of the alley. He recognized that he’d come full circle. He was looking for something now, a business he’d seen on the way to the repair shop. He scanned the signs over the doorways, trying to decipher the faded and missing letters. He stopped in front of SPEEDZING MESSENG RZ 4 ALL YO R NEEDZ.

A pen held a battered array of swoops. A group of youths loitered around them, leaning against the walls of the building. They watched Ferus with flat gazes. He knew that often messenger boys and girls were recruited from the poorer sections of cities, paid little and worked hard, with long hours and much abuse. On some planets with aging communications systems and frequent planetary atmospheric disturbances, it was sometimes faster and easier to employ a messenger than rely on the comm network.

Ferus nodded at several members of the group. He picked out the one with the most obvious attitude, the one who looked him up and down with a hostile expression.

“Who’s the fastest here?” he asked.

“Ditto,” one of the kids said, jerking his chin toward the boy Ferus was eyeing. “He’s the one.”

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Ferus gave a quick look at the battered swoops. They were basically engines with seats and handlebars. “On these machines?”

“If you got the stuff, it shouldn’t matter what you’re sitting on,” the boy named Ditto said. “But not many have the stuff.”

“So, do you think you do?” Ferus asked him.

“Said I did, didn’t I?”

“Because I’ve got a job that pays, but I need someone who’s not only fast, but who can maneuver through traffic. Heavy traffic.”

Ditto rolled his eyes. “Space traffic is easy. If you go fast enough, the others just get out of your way.”

“Even stormtroopers?”

“Stormtroopers?” the boy snorted. “They only think they know how to drive.”

The girl standing next to Ditto spoke up. She had short, spiky red hair and a dust-streaked face. “You’ve got to clear all jobs through the boss.” She jerked her chin. “Inside.”

“I don’t want to go through your boss.”

The group fell silent. Ferus knew what he was asking. If anyone did a job for him, they’d risk dismissal. “But the job will take less than three minutes. Ditto here would be the first rider, but I need the rest of you, too. I’ll pay triple rates.”

“This is becoming an almost interesting proposition,” Ditto said.

The girl looked him up and down. “We better see the credits first.”

Ferus reached into his pocket. Luckily Flame had given them all substantial amounts of credits before they’d left.

“Who wants to work for me?” he asked.

All the boys and girls crowded close. Ferus handed out credits. “You’ll get the second half at the spaceport, at the terrace at the cantina.”

The rest of the messengers looked at Ditto and the girl. They seemed to be the leaders. Ferus waited, watching them. Ditto and

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the girl stared at him, trying to make a judgment as they held the credits in their fists.

“Why not?” Ditto said. “It’s been a slow day.”

The crowd of swoops rose into the air like birds, with Ditto in the lead. Ferus stayed in the middle of the flock, flying so close to the others that he could have reached out and touched his neighbor’s elbow. He’d borrowed an old cap, pulled it down on his head the way the others did, and kept his head low, the wind in his face.

The red-haired girl, Laurn, who turned out to be Ditto’s sister, flew next to him. They flew fast, straight up out of the alley district. The airspeeders full of stormtroopers came close to check them out, but the messengers only laughed. They buzzed close to the airspeeders, circled around, dived, and climbed, zooming away as the stormtroopers ignored them and still kept a tight cordon on the area. They were used to the antics of the messenger fleet.

The fleet kept close ranks around Ferus. He was just glad he was a good enough pilot to keep up with them.

“Not bad for a space pilot,” Ditto circled back to yell at him. Ferus could tell he’d earned the boy’s respect.

When they were clear of the airspeeders, he signaled Ditto that he was leaving and peeled off toward the spaceport. He dodged the air traffic and zoomed inside the hangar. He abandoned the swoop and activated the ramp on the cruiser. He knew it was only a matter of time before the stormtroopers figured out what had happened.

The ship was empty. He accessed the engine compartment and climbed in. He slid the transpasitor into place and heard it click. Then he ran a quick systems check, careful to set the calibration perfectly. Everything flashed green. He was good to go.

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He started up the cruiser and contacted Trever on the comlink at the same time. "Be ready. I'll be there in thirty seconds."

"But I haven't finished my bantha burger."

Ferus grinned. He knew Trever would be ready.

He maneuvered the cruiser out of the hangar and out into the spaceport while he called for clearance at the tower. He headed for the cantina, a large building that was on one side of the landing area so that smaller space cruisers could pull up directly outside. At this slow speed he could see Trever's blue hair and the knot of the resistance leaders huddled around a corner table on the terrace. It was a busy cantina, with beings entering and exiting and table-hopping, and though he couldn't hear the roar and buzz of conversation, he could imagine it.

His comm unit crackled to life, and he heard his registry number.

"Report to control office," an officer commanded.

They had checked on the registry and seen it was temporary.

Ferus activated the comm. "Didn't read that. Heading for departures and will check in with departure agent. Over."

"Check in at control office, over."

"Over," Ferus muttered, shutting down the comm.

He stopped outside the terrace. Trever already had the leaders moving, heading for the cruiser by the back exit. Ferus activated the ramp. The leaders hurried toward him. Ferus was counting seconds now.

The airspeeder patrols came winging over the spaceport. Suddenly the red light flashed near the departure area. They must have traced Ferus here. They'd closed down the spaceport.

Suddenly the messengers appeared from out of the sky, piloting their swoops with seeming recklessness but perfect control. They dived toward the permacrete runways, circled, and spun in tight loops. Ferus saw Laurn's red hair fly and her cap tumble to the ground.

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The stormtrooper patrols had to practice evasive action in order not to crash. Other vehicles scrambled to get out of their way. In seconds, the scene was mayhem.

The resistance leaders attracted no notice as they hurried toward the ship. Everyone else was looking up at the sky.

"Take over," Ferus said to Wil. Wil slid into the cockpit as Ferus leaped out a few meters onto the runway. Ditto flew down, close to him, his hand outstretched. Ferus tossed the bundle of credits high. Ditto snatched it and zoomed away.

The leaders were all aboard now. Ferus hurried back inside the ship and closed the ramp. He took the pilot seat back from Wil.

"Time to get out of here," he told Trever.

He lifted off into the crowded sky. Ditto and the others flanked him for a moment. Ditto gave him a salute.

Ferus zoomed away. He could see the Imperial ships taking off after him. He pushed the engines hard. The craft responded. Within seconds they'd reached the upper atmosphere.

He dived and pushed the speed, hoping to make it past the planet's gravitational pull and into space.

Trever bent over the radar. "We've got ten ships coming up...they're splitting into two groups."

"They might not be authorized to leave the planet's atmosphere," Wil said. "But they'll send out an alert galaxy-wide."

They stared out at the Imperial fighters, willing them to turn back.

Ferus pushed the engines. He was close now. He had a fast ship and enough lead time. The fighters couldn't catch him. One by one, they dropped out.

Wil passed a hand over his forehead. "That was a little too close."

Trever grinned. "Ferus always pulls it out."

Next stop was the asteroid. But now their ship was on the Imperial alert list. They had a long way to go.

Chapter Nine

Clive and Astri weren't sure of their next move. They had to assume that Toma would be able to reach Ferus. But if they had an idea of where he was, they could track him down themselves. They decided to head to Coruscant and see if they could find Curran and Keets.

They stopped for refueling at a spaceport on a small planet near the Core. They couldn't make it back to Coruscant without refueling, but they didn't like to stop. They chose a limited spaceport with rudimentary services, hoping the security would be as lackluster as their amenities. The spaceport was basically a large landing platform with a line of docking berths on pockmarked permacrete. A tiny cantina without a door was tucked in a corner. A couple of mechanics sat outside, playing sabacc.

Astri looked at the regulations as they flashed on the screen. "I'll have to check in personally over in the control office." She stood.

"If they figure out we stole this ship, you could get arrested. I'll go."

"No, I'll have a better chance to escape notice." Astri tucked a small blaster in her boot. She straightened.

"Leave your comlink open so I can hear what goes on."

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She nodded. "If anything goes wrong, leave without me."

Clive glanced at her. She held his gaze.

"I mean it," she said. "No heroics. It's too important to get the information to Ferus."

Should he leave her if they were spotted?

Sure. Too much was at stake.

Would he leave her?

No way.

She waited for him to agree. Clive felt something momentous happen inside him. Something he'd never felt before.

He wasn't going to lie.

"I'm not going to leave you," he said.

"You have to."

"It would be easy for me to say yes," Clive said. "But I'm making a pact with you now. Now, before we begin. I'm not going to start it with a lie."

Astri's face flushed. "Begin what? Our journey?"

"That's not what I mean." He turned his back on her and fiddled with a control. He couldn't say what he meant, or felt. Couldn't say the words. He could only hope that she knew already. If they survived all this, they would be together.

He felt her hesitate behind him. Then she put her hands on the back of his chair. "I know what you mean," she said. "So we'll start out with some rules. We won't lie to each other. And we won't leave each other behind."

He felt her go, a breeze against his neck. He heard her boots thumping down the ramp. Clive smiled. Everything had changed. Everything looked different now. This dusty wreck of a spaceport, the thick orange sky. He had been in this struggle to fight the Imperials because he owed it to his friends, because he owed Ferus his life, because deep down the Empire just ticked him off.

Now he had something else to fight for.

Astri.

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She wanted to be annoyed at Clive for distracting her, but Astri felt warmth spread through her as she walked to the control office. She hadn't realized her feelings about Clive had changed so much until he'd spoken. At first she'd disapproved of him, then she'd grudgingly accepted that he wasn't such a bad guy. And then that had shifted into something else. She didn't know what was ahead, but she knew she'd face it with Clive. She had a partner now.

She walked into the office. A junior Imperial officer sat at the desk, looking bored. She wondered what he'd done to get assigned to this outpost in the middle of nowhere.

"Papers?"

She handed over her documents. She pretended to scan the horizon, but she was actually trying to study the data screen in the reflection of the transparisteel. She couldn't read it but she knew from experience that if there was a problem the screen would flash. If that happened, she was prepared to fight her way out.

How far would she go?

Would she shoot this officer? She looked at him more closely now and saw the way he'd tried to comb his hair over his large ears. He was young. Blond stubble glinted on his cheek. She peeked at his insignia. A low-level officer. He could have come from many of the planets in the galaxy that had little resources or wealth. For young people on those kinds of worlds, the Empire was a way out. Lune had told her about some of the young boys and girls at the new Imperial Academy. He'd said for some of them, their good reflexes were the only thing they had. It wasn't so much that they joined the Empire—they just wanted to fly and see the galaxy.

"Not much to look at out there," the officer said.

"You don't seem to get many visitors." She gazed at the reflection. She didn't see anything flash, and the officer didn't change his posture.

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“Having trouble with the transmission,” he said. “It can get slow on this planet. Atmospheric haze with ion particles...hard on comm systems.”

Astri flashed him a smile. He seemed almost human. “So you get to be in the middle of nowhere, and you can’t even call out.”

“You got that right.”

“So, how’s the cantina? Will I survive if I have some grub there?” Astri asked. She was beginning to feel nervous. This was taking too long. She could see that Clive had finished refueling.

“You take your chances.”

“Listen, what if I just go pick up some food? By the time I come back, my clearance might come through,” Astri said. “What do you say? Give a girl a break—I’ve been living on protein pellets.”

He gave a last glance at the screen. “I don’t know...”

“I’ll be back in three minutes. Promise.”

“All right.” He turned back to the screen.

She walked out and headed toward the cantina. Clive’s voice came from her comlink. “Making friends in there?”

“What should we do?”

“Play it out. I can see that the comm system is down.”

“But Clive, what if...”

He paused. “You do what you have to do. I’ll be right behind you. Wait...I just got a clear signal...”

“I’ll go back.” Astri hurried toward the control office. When she entered, the officer was just returning to his desk.

“Okay, we’re back up to speed.” He glanced at the screen and this time Astri didn’t have to squint in order to see the flashing alert.

He looked up and his eyes met hers. Time seemed to stop. The moment extended while neither of them moved.

She reached down, took out her blaster, and fired.

One of the things Hydra liked about her job as an Imperial Inquisitor was the attire. She liked feeling enveloped in the robe

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that swept the floor and the hood that, if worn properly, completely shadowed her face. She had been raised in a tiny hut with a silent, savage uncle, and darkness brought her not comfort, but a sense of where she belonged.

She had been scratching out an existence on her homeworld, serving her uncle and enduring him, when Palpatine had risen to power. She had seen him on the HoloNet news when he declared himself Emperor.

“Just what we need,” her uncle had said, and spat on the floor. “Another politician in charge. Nothing to do with us.”

But something in Hydra thrilled to it. One person taking on the challenge of ruling a galaxy.

As she cleaned the floor that day, as she herded the animals the next, as she lay awake in the cold night, it had slowly come upon her that her situation prepared her exactly for this new way the galaxy had turned. She knew how to serve power. She knew both cunning and subservience. Now she could use her skills to serve a better master.

She had left that day. She knew where she belonged.

It had taken her months to find the right way to break in. She had found work, but no opportunity to rise. She wasn't a talker, and she had never learned the art of subtle flattery, advancing your cause by breathing compliments in a dullard's ear. She was only good at watching. And efficiency. She came to see that the Empire valued efficiency more than anything else. And that was what would transform the galaxy, she was sure. Efficiency would streamline travel and communication and industry, and the galaxy would be a beautiful thing, running like an enormous BRT computer, a humming majesty of a thing.

Her efficiency was noticed finally. Lord Vader put her on the Inquisitor's team and checked in with her, making sure she was advancing and receiving important assignments. That had puzzled her, because one of the things she admired about him was that he didn't seem to be the type to care about those things. Then she realized that he had placed her there for another

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reason. It was simple: He wanted her to tell him what the other Inquisitors were doing, who was close to Sano Sauro, and if any assignments came from the Emperor himself.

Hydra was pleased to do this. Lord Vader was next to the Emperor. It gave her a thrill to be valued by someone so powerful. When she was made Head Inquisitor she obtained her reward. Her first reward. She knew there would be more to come.

This was the first time he'd given her an important assignment. Of course she had reported to him on Ferus Olin's activities, but that had just involved keeping her eyes and ears open. She hadn't come up with much. And her work on Alderaan hadn't pleased the Emperor. Hydra had felt her status slide, and it had made her sick inside. She couldn't fail at this job. She had nowhere else to go.

But now Lord Vader had asked her to do something that was obviously important. If she did well, no doubt he would pass along word of her prowess to the Emperor.

Then I might have need of you, he had said. Hydra thrilled to the memory of it.

The comm unit signaled, and she answered it. She was in luck. The ship had been spotted. It had been snared in a routine stop that was starting to be instituted in the Core. Imperial ships would pick a quadrant and order all ships to report to a nearby space station. There they would wait in rows until their registries and papers were checked. It was a massive inconvenience for so many, but it showed everyone who was in charge.

Apparently a mechanic on an out-of-the-way spaceport had sent out a message. The ship had filed false registry numbers and had taken off without clearance. It was just luck that it had been caught in the snare.

No, not luck, Hydra thought. *Efficiency*. Put enough controls on gateways in the galaxy and you were bound to catch what you were looking for.

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She was close to the space station. She ordered the official to detain the ship. She would be there soon to arrest its passengers.

Chapter Ten

“So what do you think will happen to the ship after we complete the mission?” Trever asked Ferus. They were alone in the cockpit. The ship was now in hyperspace, safe for now.

“Good question,” Ferus said. “We should probably talk about that at the meeting. We have two fast, new ships. We can decide who needs them most.”

“I’ve already decided,” Trever said.

Ferus laughed. “Ah, let me guess. Would that be you?”

“Hey, I’m in the resistance. And I need a ship. Therefore...” Trever shrugged. “C’mon, Ferus, let’s take this one. It’s such a sweet ride. These sublight engines really crank. I know we had a little engine trouble, but once we get down there and really get a look at her, we can tweak her. Put in an extra ion drive for a backup system and we’ll be golden.”

“The used parts dealer told me that these new engines sometimes have problems with the transpositors and magnetic fields,” Ferus said. “It seemed like he was telling the truth—wait a second.” Suddenly he bounded out of his chair. In a moment he’d accessed the engine panel and climbed down.

“Going to check?” Trever asked. “Good idea. Do you need a glow-lamp down there?”

Trever heard Ferus grunt, as if he were trying to use some muscle to loosen a part.

“Need a hand?”

Ferus reappeared, hauling himself up and then sitting on the floor of the cockpit. “We have a problem. There’s a tracer beacon on the ship. When the parts dealer mentioned a magnetic storm, it didn’t make sense. Then I remembered that sometimes tracer beacons have a small magnetic field. If it’s placed close to a transpositor, it could affect it.”

“An *activated* tracer beacon?” Trever couldn’t wrap his mind around it. “But how can that be? Do you think it’s some sort of security system that the salesman back on Coruscant didn’t get a chance to dismantle?”

Ferus shook his head. “I wish it were so.”

“But that means...”

“There’s a spy somewhere in our group.”

“But that’s impossible!” Trever said. “Everyone on this ship is a resistance fighter.”

“I know. But someone on the ship is a spy.”

They didn’t say anything for a moment, just stared at each other. Ferus went over the process in his head. Over the past twenty-six hours they’d traveled to three spaceports and picked up twenty-one resistance leaders. He had always been in the cockpit where the engine compartment was located, or Trever had. Except for their unscheduled stop. That was the only time the cockpit had been empty.

“While I was out looking for the part, did you notice anyone go into the cockpit?”

Trever thought carefully. “We were all in the salon most of the time. But then when we were getting ready to move to the cantina, someone could have sneaked in. I didn’t keep track of everyone. I didn’t know...”

“It’s all right, Trever. You had no reason to suspect anyone.”

“What are we going to do now?”

Jude Watson

“Well, the tracer can’t work steadily in hyperspace, so we’re all right for the moment. As soon as we leave hyperspace, we’ve got to contact Ry-Gaul and Solace and arrange a meeting together before we get to the asteroid. We need to go over all the ships before we proceed. We can’t assume that the other ships are clear. We can’t bring a spy to the asteroid, so we either have to cancel the meeting or figure out who it is. And we have to do all this fast before we put the whole group in three ships.”

Ferus jumped to his feet and went to the nav computer. “We need someplace close to the asteroid, but not too close. Not a spaceport. Not a planet...”

“A moon,” Trever said.

“An uninhabited moon.” Ferus flipped through the possibilities quickly as the star map hologram flashed. He reached out a finger and pointed. “Here. XT987. Now let’s just hope that Solace and Ry-Gaul are within range.”

After he reverted to normal space, Ferus contacted Ry-Gaul and Solace and was relieved when both responded. Now he had the hard task of informing the resistance leaders that they would have to land. Ferus presented it as a necessary step before proceeding to the base, but there were grumbles and some dissent.

“Every stop we make puts us in danger,” Boar pointed out.

The fractures in the group were widening. This was a group who had risked everything to resist the Empire, but they each had their own ideas. They were too used to danger and uncertainty to panic, but they weren’t happy.

Ferus was glad to see Ry-Gaul’s ship and Flame’s cruiser already waiting when he arrived. This meeting would have to be quick. There was no telling where the Imperial forces were at this point, only that they were monitoring his progress across the galaxy. A short stop wouldn’t cause much alarm; something prolonged might cause them to investigate.

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He signaled to Ry-Gaul, Solace, and Flame to join him. “We’ve got trouble,” he said. “I’m sure there is an informer aboard my ship. There’s a tracer beacon planted in my ship’s engine. I put a trace scrambler on it for now. It’ll fool whoever is tracing us, but not for long.”

Ry-Gaul didn’t react. He never did. Solace narrowed her eyes, and Flame looked shocked. “That’s impossible,” she said. “They are all heroes.”

“So we thought,” Ferus said.

Solace shook her head. “This means the Empire knows about Moonstrike.”

“It doesn’t matter if they know,” Ferus said. “It only matters if they find out who’s involved. None of the members knew each other before this trip.”

“What was the time frame when you were away from the cockpit?” Ry-Gaul asked. “Do you have any idea who did it?”

Ferus shook his head. “That’s the problem. I can’t narrow it down.”

“We can’t let this derail the meeting,” Flame said. “I promised them all safe passage.” She clasped her hands together. “This is a disaster!”

“Well, we can’t lead them to the asteroid,” Solace said. “That’s clear. Ry-Gaul, let’s check our ships just to be sure.” Ry-Gaul nodded shortly. To Ferus, it seemed that Ry-Gaul had something he wanted to say, but he wasn’t ready to say it. He resolved to ask him privately.

Solace and Ry-Gaul went off to check the ships. Flame turned to Ferus. “Who do you think it is?” she asked. “You must have some suspicions.”

“I don’t,” Ferus said. “Boar Benu has been argumentative...suspicious of everything I do. It could be a way to throw suspicion off of him.”

Flame nodded slowly. “He was in an Imperial jail for a time. They could have gotten to him there.”

Jude Watson

"That's not a reason to suspect him," Ferus said. "I've been in an Imperial jail. Twice."

"If Ry-Gaul and Solace find that their ships are clear, maybe we should load all the members—minus the ones you were ferrying—onto one ship," Flame suggested. "Give me the coordinates and I'll take them to the asteroid. The Jedi can remain and set up a trap."

"It's not a bad plan, but let's wait and see what Ry-Gaul and Solace propose," Ferus said.

Ry-Gaul and Solace returned. "My ship is clean," Solace reported.

"Mine, too," Ry-Gaul said.

"Flame proposes that she take most of the group on until we figure out who the spy is," Ferus said.

"We've come this far," Flame said. "We can't stop now."

"I think one of us should take my ship and lead them on a wild goose chase," Ferus said. "That will buy us time."

"Ry-Gaul, maybe you should do that," Solace said. "You can leave the ship on an out-of-the-way planet, with the tracer beacon activated. Then Flame will take the resistance leader and pick you up and proceed onward. But first, we have to trap the spy."

Ry-Gaul spoke for the first time. "The leaders must be getting restless. Solace, Flame, why don't you see if you can calm them down."

The two went off to the other two ships. Ferus turned to Ry-Gaul. "Ask Solace to be a diplomat? You've got to be kidding."

"I wanted to talk to you alone." Ry-Gaul's silver eyes stayed on Flame as she walked away. "You are assuming the tracer was placed aboard while you were off finding the new part," Ry-Gaul began.

"That was the only time I left the cockpit," Ferus said.

"You are making an assumption."

Ferus thought for a moment. It took him several seconds to catch up to Ry-Gaul. "I'm assuming that the tracer was placed

after we got the ship. But we could have obtained the ship with the tracer already on board and activated.”

Ry-Gaul didn’t say a word. He let Ferus work it out.

“But that would mean that the Empire knew we would take the ship. And the only way they would know that would be...” Ferus felt his breath catch. “If Flame was an Imperial spy.”

“It is a possibility we should not overlook,” Ry-Gaul said. “She was the one who set us up with the ships. It almost seemed too easy, if you think about it.”

Ferus felt a surprising rage gather from the soles of his boots to the top of his head. He was tired of maybes and uncertainty. He was furious that they were at this crossroads. They were at the mercy of one person who was holding up the completion of an intricate plan. He felt the anger grow, and this time he didn’t turn away from it. The Sith Holocron whispered something to him that made sense.

Let your anger go. It’s time. When you are thwarted, use your anger.

“There’s one way to find out who it is,” Ferus said. “Line them all up. Threaten to kill them all if one of them doesn’t confess to being the spy.”

Ry-Gaul looked startled. Ferus realized that the thought in his head had come out. It was one of those thoughts he didn’t understand, the ones that didn’t seem to come from him. Ry-Gaul focused on him, really examining him in a way that made Ferus furious. How could he not know that anger was a weapon like any other?

Because the Jedi are weak.

That’s why we destroyed them so easily.

They never saw it coming.

Ferus stalked away. He put his hands on the Holocron. He was finally ready. Here on this uninhabited moon, in the middle of the galaxy, in the middle of uncertainty.

Hidden behind the ship, he slipped the Sith Holocron out of his tunic and set it in motion. Images came at him, a rush of knowledge that seemed to be absorbed before it was registered.

Jude Watson

Terrible things, fascinating things, things that made his stomach churn. He didn't know how long he looked; it felt like hours. He had to wrest himself away. It took all of his strength.

It had only been seconds.

He blinked. He had seen too much to process, but he knew he had been changed. He felt the Emperor's hand on him now.

Ry-Gaul was suddenly in front of him. "I felt something...the dark side of the Force. Ferus?"

He gathered himself together. He mustn't let Ry-Gaul know. He turned to face the older Jedi. He saw the careworn, silver eyes, the stubble of silver hair. Ry-Gaul suddenly looked pathetic to him, not strong.

"Ferus?" Ry-Gaul narrowed his eyes.

"The spy is Flame. You're right." He had been given a glimpse into dark hearts, and he recognized the breed. Facts clicked in his head, motivations, cunning.

Ry-Gaul strode forward suddenly and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Forget about the spy. I feel the dark side of the Force. Not from Flame, my friend. *You*."

"Tell me something," Ferus answered. "What is so wrong with using anger? 'Feel your anger, let it go,'" he mimicked. "What did that philosophy do for the Jedi? What did it get us but...here?" He waved his arms to take in the bleak, rocky moon, the ships, the evidence of their being hunted, the evidence of their exile.

Ry-Gaul dropped his hands. "The Jedi made many mistakes. We were...fooled."

"*Fooled?* Children are fooled! The Jedi lost the galaxy!"

"The galaxy was not ours to lose."

"They destroyed us, and we never saw it coming!"

"Ferus." Ry-Gaul spoke his name with anguish. "To act with anger as your propulsion is never the way."

"It is the only way. It is the only thing we have left!" Ferus took a step backward. "I will not be taken down. I will not be hunted. I'm going to take care of this now."

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He stalked away. He could feel Ry-Gaul behind him. Close. Too close. Afraid of what he might do.

He found Flame standing with Solace and Trever, their heads together, discussing their next move.

"It's Flame," Ferus said. Why bother with preliminaries? "She's the spy."

Solace didn't show her surprise. She looked to Ry-Gaul for confirmation.

Trever shook his head. "You're crazy, Ferus. What are you talking about? She arranged this whole thing. She started Moonstrike."

"Exactly," Ferus said. "What better way to cut off the effective resistance movements at the start than by getting them in one place and destroying them?"

"You don't have much to say, Flame," Solace said.

"I don't think Ferus would listen," she said. "I think the accusation is ridiculous, of course. I've been fighting with you, shoulder to shoulder. I was shot on Bellassa rescuing Amie Antin."

"That's right, Ferus!" Trever said.

"Yes, you got a blaster wound during the operation," Ferus said. "You must have been furious. You didn't know the full extent of the plan, only that we were going to rescue Amie. It was a perfect way to prove your loyalty to the Eleven. You needed Wil and Amie to commit to Moonstrike, and it was the only way to ensure that they would join."

"Tell them about Rosha, Trever," Flame said. Her voice was steady.

"She brought us through heavy fire," Trever said. "She risked her life to save the Roshan delegation. And she put the ship down and offered to go out first, to make sure it was safe. I went with her..."

"And Imperial fighters appeared and blew up the ship before the Roshans could exit," Ferus said.

Jude Watson

“That wasn’t her fault! There were no fighters on the sensor screen! And she stayed with me and helped me on Rosha, even while the whole capital city was burning. She found us food, and shelter, and kept us safe. And then she found the resistance and got together with them—” Trever faltered.

“Yes, she found the resistance, didn’t she?” Ferus encouraged. “She brought them together, maybe even helped set it up. Only it worked a little too well, didn’t it? The Roshans turned out to put up an amazing fight, a fight no one had expected, and Vader didn’t want another Bellassa on his hands. So she called a meeting and told the Empire where it would be—”

“But she was there, too! We were all caught when they blew up the building! She saved my life,” Trever said desperately. “She pulled me into a crawlspace underneath the floor.”

“Things go wrong sometimes,” Ferus said. “The order to attack is given a few seconds early. No doubt she’d planned to be out of there before it happened. Leaving you, most likely.”

“No.” Trever shook his head stubbornly.

“Trever, don’t you see?” It was all so clear to Ferus now. He knew the way Vader thought. And he had no doubt that Vader was running this operation. “She is always in the midst of the battle but is never killed. She brought them all in and promised them safety and recruited us. All this time, she was drawing us in. How do you think the Empire found out about Thugger’s Alley?”

“No,” Trever whispered. He shook his head again, more vehemently than before. “She couldn’t have.”

“That was part of Twilight. The operation we couldn’t figure out. It is one strike against all the most powerful resistance leaders at the same time. He will crush the rebellion before it has a chance to start! And he used Flame to do it.”

Solace’s comlink signaled, and she stepped away. She listened for a few minutes.

When she returned, her face was grave. “That was Clive and Astri. They’ve been on Flame’s trail for some time now. Clive

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suspected her. They've discovered her real name. Eve Yarrow. She's an Imperial agent."

Flame's face darkened. "It's not true!" Now at last her manner began to crack. "Liars!"

"What should we do now?" Solace asked quietly.

Ferus felt a surge of power. The Sith Holocron burned his skin, but he enjoyed the sensation of burning. He felt a darkness around him, a shimmering, beautiful thing.

"Execute her," he said.

Chapter Eleven

“At least we got through to Ferus about Eve,” Clive said.

“What did Solace say?” Astri kept her eyes on the nav screen. They had been pulled into a routine check by Imperial vessels and were lined up on a spaceport runway. Imperial starfighters buzzed overhead, making sure no one took off.

It was a tense situation, but they had prepared for it. At the last spaceport Clive had used Imperial equipment to key in a new ID profile and registry.

“Who, Lady Chatty? Nothing. She just said, ‘I understand,’ and broke the communication. She was with Ferus and Flame, though, so Flame is caught, no question. The question is, what do we do now?”

“Vader mentioned the Beshpin system,” Astri said. “We could head out there and see what we can find out.”

“That’s a long way to go just to noodle around,” Clive said. “We don’t have any clear information to go on. We still don’t know what Twilight is.” He watched Astri’s face. He was beginning to be able to read it. “Don’t blame yourself for what happened at the spaceport,” he said. “You couldn’t shoot him. That’s a good thing. And we got away.”

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“It was a failure of nerve,” Astri said. “I could have compromised everything. I had my blaster aimed at him. But I couldn’t fire directly at him.”

“Maybe we’re not cut out to be spies. Look, we can fight the Empire with everything we have, but we don’t have to turn into them.”

Astri stared at the nav screen but she was picturing the scene back at the spaceport. The Imperial officer, looking at her. She, pointing her blaster at him. All she could see was his eyes, young and afraid.

She’d moved the blaster just a couple of millimeters and blasted his computer instead. The officer had sprung back, fumbling for his blaster, and she’d moved forward quickly and placed her blaster against his head. “The next one is for you if you move,” she’d said. She put all her will into the words, but she’d known they were hollow.

Then Clive had arrived. They’d taken the officer’s blaster and comlink, and had destroyed the rest of the communication equipment. It bought them time. But they knew that the next ship to land would give him access to a comm system.

“We’re already wanted for stealing the cruiser,” Clive said as they left the planet. “So now we’ll be wanted twice. Destroying an Imperial computer system should get us a couple of years in jail, no question.”

Astri wished she knew how far she was willing to go to be a resistance fighter. She knew she wasn’t willing to kill. No, Clive was right. She didn’t want to turn into them. She didn’t want to lose sight of who she was.

She stared at the screen, waiting for their number to be called up and given a release. No ships had taken off in some time. “Something’s wrong,” she said. “The line should be moving faster than this.”

“Let me check it out,” Clive said. He lowered the ramp and exited the craft, then ambled off toward a knot of spacers talking in a group.

Jude Watson

“What’s going on, mates?” he asked. “Anybody know what the holdup is?”

A short, pudgy pilot in a greasy flight suit snorted. “You think they tell us anything?”

“What I don’t get is, they’ve checked ships through that they’re holding on the ground,” another spacer said. “You’d think they’d release them.”

“Or let us park in the hangar and wait this out in the cantina,” a spindly pilot broke in.

“I’ll tell you what this is, if you ask me,” the second spacer said. “I’ve seen this before. They’re holding us all here because they’re waiting for some Imperial topper to get here. Mark my words, they want to arrest somebody, but there’s nobody here important enough to do the job.”

“So we’ve got to broil under these three suns while we wait for some topper?” The pudgy pilot blew out a breath of air in exasperation. “I’ve got a cargo hold full of premium dates from Nantuker that’re spoiling as we’re talking. This is one long blasted twilight of a day, let me tell you.”

Clive ambled away, not letting his pace reveal his worry. He checked out the Imperial officials at the control office. They certainly didn’t look too busy. They were waiting. In the small cluster of buildings was a detainment center, a fancy word for jail. He hoped he wouldn’t find himself in it.

He scooted back up the ramp and told Astri the news. “I’m afraid the people they’re waiting to arrest are us,” he said. “We’ve got to think of a plan.”

“It’s a space station,” Astri said. “We’ve got nowhere to go. And look at all those TIE fighters lined up. We can’t outrun them.”

An Imperial ship appeared in the sky. It swept down and landed in front of the line of space vehicles.

“This is not good,” Astri said as a hooded figure emerged. “It’s an Inquisitor.”

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"I'll place bets that it's Hydra," Clive said. "She fits Ferus's description."

"She knows we're here," Astri said.

"There's only one way out of here," Clive said. "That's aboard her ship."

"Steal an Inquisitor's ship?" Astri asked. "How are we going to do that?"

"Carefully," Clive replied.

The spaceport was thrown into a moderate amount of confusion due to the presence of an upper-level official. Officers flocked to the command center, trying to impress her. Low-level functionaries laid low, trying to escape notice. And the spacers, pilots, cargo drivers, and freighter captains were furious that they were being held up this long. They began to complain. Loudly.

The pilots and passengers were out on the permacrete runways now, milling and discussing the holdup. It was easy for Clive and Astri to thread through the crowd unnoticed, even as a voice over the loudspeaker ordered everyone to return to their vehicles.

Hydra had put down her craft directly in front of a bulk freighter that was outfitted for passengers. The crowd was confused and angry, and it gave Clive and Astri cover to quickly board Hydra's ship. She'd left the ramp down in her haste.

"What's your plan?" Astri asked, peering out the viewport. Stormtroopers with blaster rifles were beginning to get the crowd under control. Clive and Astri didn't have much time. "I know you have a plan. I just hope it doesn't involve taking off with about fifty TIE fighters shooting at us."

"We're going to sail out of here like a free bird." Clive hurried to the small stateroom. He flung open a small recessed door.

"You see? Even an Inquisitor needs a change of clothes." He flung an Inquisitor's robe toward Astri. "Put this on."

She looked at it. "You've got to be kidding."

"I don't kid when I'm looking at prison time, kiddo."

Jude Watson

Astri donned the robe and pulled the hood forward. She was the same height and size as Hydra, and Clive thought she had a good chance of pulling this off.

“Give me five minutes to get arrested,” he said. “I’ll be wearing a hidden transmitter...let’s hope they don’t find it. Hydra isn’t going to let these officers get credit for the arrest. She’s going to want to interrogate me. She’ll take me into that detainment cell. When I’m alone with her, wait a few minutes and then come into the main office and tell them to let you into the cell.”

“What if she doesn’t take you into the detainment cell? What if she takes you aboard the ship?”

“Then we hold her hostage and escape that way.”

“Great,” Astri muttered. “Just great.”

Clive started out the ship, then stuck his head back in. “And may the Force be with you,” he said with a quick grin.

He vaulted out of the ship. Astri pressed close to the viewport. She watched him walk toward the control office as though he didn’t have a care in the world.

She heard his voice come through the transmitter. He asked when he’d be able to take off. Then she heard boots clicking and Clive saying, “Whoa, mate, no need for that, I’ll just wait for my turn...”

And a voice, low and clear. “Arrest him.”

“Arrest him,” Astri said out loud, trying to match that voice.

Clive narrated his arrest so she’d know where he was. “Where are you taking me? I haven’t done anything. Hey, everybody flies under a false registry sometimes. My cruiser wasn’t up to inspection, so I...aw, not a detention cell. This is cruel.”

Astri heard the unmistakable sound of security locks snapping. Then Hydra’s voice again.

“Who were you with at the Dexus-12 spaceport?”

“No one. I was alone.”

“Correction. You were with a woman. What happened to her?”

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“She left me. Women always do.”

“What were you doing on Niro 11?” Hydra asked.

“Banking,” Clive answered. “Isn’t that the only thing to do on Niro 11?”

“If you refuse to answer you’ll encounter more persuasive techniques when you meet Lord Vader.”

“I did answer, Your Inquistiveness,” Clive said. “Next question?”

Astri checked her reflection in the durasteel door. She walked down the ramp and headed for the control office. Underneath the cover of the long sleeves of the robe, she crossed her fingers.

She strode into the control office. The officer at the console looked surprised. “Inquisitor Hydra, I thought you were with the prisoner.”

“I’m returning there now. Give me the security device for the cell.”

“That’s against procedure. The prisoner could get it from you.”

“Correction. I am Head Inquisitor, captain. Nobody gets anything from me.” Astri put out her hand. After a moment’s hesitation, the officer put the security device in it.

“That will unlock the cell,” the office informed her. “If you need me, there’s a comm unit near the door with an emergency call button.”

She nodded and turned away.

She walked through the connecting hallway to the detainment cell door. Outside the door she stopped for a moment. A locked cabinet contained a few blaster rifles, stun cuffs, and a stun net launcher. She coded in the number she saw on the door onto her security device. The cabinet opened. Astri grabbed the stun net launcher. Then she pressed the button to release the locking device of the cell and walked in.

Hydra had her back to the door. “I said I didn’t want to be disturbed.”

Jude Watson

Astri put a blaster against her back. “So sorry.” She reached around and took Hydra’s blaster from her utility belt.

“Do you mind?” Clive gestured toward his stun cuffs. Astri pointed the security device and released the locking mechanism.

Hydra gave a small, chilling smile. “You won’t get away with this.”

Astri activated the stun net launcher. The stun net wrapped around Hydra, forcing her to the floor and imprisoning her, unable to move or speak.

“Correction,” Astri said. “We *are* getting away with it.”

“We’d love to stay and chat, but you don’t seem to be in the mood for talking,” Clive took Astri’s hand and squeezed. “Ready to take me prisoner, my beauty?”

Astri gestured with her blaster. “Get in front and I’ll march you out.”

She unlocked the detainment cell door, and they slipped out...but not before Clive rigged it so nobody would be using the door anytime soon.

Astri kept her blaster on Clive. She marched him out to the outer office.

“I’m taking the prisoner to Lord Vader,” Astri said. “Institute full clearances for my ship.”

“Right away.”

Astri felt sweat snake down her sides as she marched Clive toward the ship. At every step she expected to be called back. But they made the ramp and climbed aboard. She threw herself into the pilot seat and started the pre-flight check.

Clive kept his gaze out the viewport. “So far, so good. Aren’t you going to compliment my genius?”

“We’re not gone yet.” Astri spoke into the comm, “Clearance requested.”

“Clearance granted.”

She pushed the engines, and the cruiser shot into the air. They left the spaceport behind.

“Okay,” Astri said. “It was a genius plan.”

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Clive settled back into the copilot's seat. "Better late than never."

Chapter Twelve

Ferus saw the Jedi turn to him in astonishment. He didn't care. He felt as though he were looking at them from a distance.

Trever's eyes...He couldn't quite meet Trever's eyes.

"You can't!" Flame's voice was shrill. "You can't just...do that!"

The resistance leaders, tired of waiting and knowing something bad was going on, had climbed out of the cruisers, and now surrounded Flame and the Jedi in a tight knot.

"She is an Imperial spy?"

"This is outrageous!"

"You promised us safety!"

"We *are* safe," Solace said sharply. "So let's focus on what to do next."

"Ferus Olin is right." Boar spoke up. "I don't countenance this, but we have no choice. She can identify all of us. There's too much at stake. We must execute her."

"Wait." Flame licked her lips. "We can bargain."

"We don't make bargains with traitors!" one of the leaders said.

"There is a backup device aboard my ship," Flame said. "It will lead the Empire to you if you don't dismantle it. Trust me,

you won't find it. Only I know where it is. It is tracking you right now."

"It could be a trick," someone said.

"All right," Ferus said. "We give you your life if you dismantle the device."

Flame nodded nervously. Followed closely by the others, she headed toward her ship.

"Did you mean that?" Trever asked Ferus.

Ferus wasn't sure. The voice inside him said, *Why should you keep your word?*

"Ferus, the dark side is working on you," Ry-Gaul said. "Solace and I can feel it. You must tell us what's happening to you. You've been a double agent for too long. Has the Emperor given you something to hold for him?"

"No." *No, I am holding it for me.*

"You said you would execute her," Ry-Gaul continued. "That is not the Jedi way. If you are struggling, let us know."

"Don't think we can't understand," Solace said. "We've wandered the galaxy since Order 66. We've seen and done plenty. I was a bounty hunter, remember?"

"We both drifted away from the Force and came back again," Ry-Gaul said. "Just connect with the Force. It will show you the path. Just connect."

Ferus saw compassion in their eyes, not worry. Some of the veil lifted from him. He felt himself coming back. He felt the Force flowing from Ry-Gaul and Solace.

He was spared from answering when Flame returned with the others.

"She did it," Boar said. "There was a device hidden in the cargo hold. Impossible to find, as she said. So now we must spare her life."

"We'll leave you here with survival equipment," Solace said. "This moon isn't so far out of the way. There are plans to map this quadrant. Someone will find you eventually."

Jude Watson

“You’re really going to leave me here?” Flame asked. “I can’t be here alone! Trever, don’t let them!”

Trever turned away.

The three Jedi walked toward the ships. “Solace had a good idea,” Ry-Gaul said. “I’ll take Ferus’s ship and activate the tracer beacon. I’ll leave it at a crowded spaceport and transfer to Solace’s ship. Then we can head for the asteroid.”

Ferus felt his head clear. The distance between him and the others didn’t feel as wide. He drew strength from the living Force he could feel in Ry-Gaul and Solace. He shook his head, trying to remain with them, all of him, his heart and mind. He tried to grasp the knowledge he felt he’d gained without letting it suck him in. He had seen into the mind of a Sith, and he felt he knew better how it worked.

“Vader will have a backup,” he said. “Not just the one on Flame’s ship. He would have something else, some other way to track us. Solace, you told us that Clive said Vader was heading to an emergency drop. I think Flame left Vader a message there. She is only acting afraid now. She knows Vader will find her. I have to get to that message before he does. So don’t go to the asteroid until you receive the all clear from me.”

“But how do you know where the secret drop is?” Trever asked.

“The Bepin system?” Solace asked doubtfully. “That’s an awfully big place.”

Ferus shook his head. “The place has to be more central than that. She wouldn’t have had time to get to Bepin and back to Coruscant to leave him a message. I have an idea.”

“I want to come with you,” Trever said.

Ferus hesitated. Part of him didn’t want Trever with him. He couldn’t forget the look on Trever’s face when he thought Ferus would execute Flame. If he had to access the dark side of the Force again, he didn’t want Trever to see it.

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Still, he couldn't think of a reason to refuse. And part of him, the part that was still a Jedi, wanted Trever with him. Maybe if he went too far, Trever could save him from himself.

He nodded shortly.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Trever asked.

"Back to Coruscant."

They said their good-byes. Ferus could see the worry in Ry-Gaul's and Solace's eyes when he took his leave. He turned his back on them, not wanting to see it there.

Then he turned again. He didn't want to leave them this way. Their gazes still rested on him.

"I won't fail you," he said. "You must trust me."

"Trust in the Force," Ry-Gaul said. "It will hold you. Connect."

In deep space, stars burned and fell. Trever felt as though the future was rushing toward him. Whatever was going to happen seemed inevitable. It seemed he couldn't turn away. He was bound to accompany Ferus, no matter where he was going. No matter what he would do.

Looking at Ferus's face, he felt the difference in him. It wasn't just that the humor was missing. Something that used to flow between them now was stopped up. It came through at odd times, odd moments. Trever wished he could take Ferus by the shoulders and shake the old Ferus out of him again.

"So are you going to fill me in?" Trever asked. "Where's the secret drop?"

"Do you remember that day you told me you saw the ruined Temple, and how sad it made you feel?" Ferus asked.

Trever nodded. "Now that I know Jedi, it's the ultimate new moon bummer."

"You saw Flame that day, too."

"That's right. She was surprised to see me. She'd just been to see Bail Organa, she said. Or she sorta said it."

Jude Watson

“Bail Organa was on his way to Alderaan that morning,” Ferus said. “He might have been there already.”

“After Dex’s hideout was raided...when I thought everyone was dead...Ry-Gaul and I saw her sitting in a café. When she saw us, she said how relieved she was. But...when I think about it, I don’t remember relief. Only surprise.” Trever felt the strain in his voice. “Do you think she meant for me to die that day?”

“I think it’s possible. Certainly the raid was meant to hit Ry-Gaul. Flame had no way of knowing the two of you were rescuing Linna Naltree.”

“So do you think the secret drop is at the Temple?” Trever asked. “Why?”

Ferus spun in his chair to face Trever. The ship was on autopilot now. “There was a fellow student at the Temple when I was there. I knew him well, though we weren’t friends. One of his favorite places to retreat to was the Map Room. Everyone knew that about him.”

“Okay,” Trever said. “But the Temple is destroyed. And what does that have to do with Vader?”

“The Map Room is still intact,” Ferus said. “I saw it when we broke into the Temple. And that Padawan became a great Jedi. And then he became Darth Vader.”

“You mean you knew Vader when he was young?”

Ferus nodded. “Now that I know that, I know other things about him. Things I can use.”

“Whoa, let’s revert to normal speed. You’re going too fast for me. Are you saying you’re going to fight him again?”

Instead of answering, Ferus turned back to the instrument panel. “Right now I’m focusing on keeping Moonstrike on track. The best revenge would be to turn this all around. Start a rebellion from a snare the Empire created to destroy one.”

Trever settled back into his seat with an ease he didn’t feel. “Back there, on that moon...when we found out that Flame was an Imperial agent...you said to execute her because you were trying to pressure her. I mean, you wouldn’t have *done* it, right?”

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Ferus turned away, not answering. He heard the question as a rhythm in his blood. What would he do, how far would he go?

Could he have killed Flame?

Was this what happened to you, Anakin? Did you feel yourself splitting? Did the faces of those you cared about seem to be talking to you from a distance? Did you feel your anger growing, and did it feel good to have it grow? Did you think you were right...and they were standing in your way?

Did you hear a Sith's voice in your head and think it was yours?

Chapter Thirteen

The ruined Temple filled his vision. Ferus felt oddly calm. It had started here, his life's journey. He had come here as a baby. He had left here as a young man, sick at heart. He had returned to find everything he'd loved had been destroyed.

And now here he was again. He could feel the Force here as though it was carried on the wind. But the wind was part of the Force, as much as the clouds and the sun and the millions of beings who inhabited this planet. He mustn't forget that. He mustn't only see corruption and decay. That was what the Emperor wanted him to see.

"I want to go in with you."

"No, Trever. I'm going alone." Ferus didn't even lean on the words. There was no way he was bringing Trever into danger.

At least I can spare him this.

"The security isn't as tight now that the Empire isn't using the Temple," he said. "I'll go in, see if I'm right, see if there's a message. Then I'm out." He turned to Trever. "No arguments. Just wait here for me."

He left Trever and circled around to the base of the Temple. He saw the crumbling stone of the ruined terraces. There—just above him—what once had been transparisteel had been shattered. Plastoid had been adhered to the opening as a clumsy

fix, but there was room there to sneak in. With the help of a lightsaber.

The plastoid peeled back silently. He slipped inside. He knew where he was immediately. The Temple was part of him, every chamber, every hallway.

He stood in the center of the ruined room. For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of remembering. The breakfast room. A smaller, more intimate space where sometimes the Padawans were allowed to share the morning meal with the Jedi Masters who were in residence. It was chosen for its morning light, of course. And the light—Ferus closed his eyes, remembering. As thick and golden as the butter on their plates, streaming in to warm fingers still cold from the chill of morning exercises. On fine days the transparisteel rose into the ceilings and the room became filled with fresh air.

He remembered his fingers curling around a thick mug of steaming tea. The smells of thick slices of bread fried in sweet butter and syrup. Fruit heaped on serving plates. The Jedi Masters, relaxed in this setting, smiling at their students. And the day ahead, filled with study and activity, with meditation, with play.

This was what they had destroyed.

He walked through, cinders crunching under his boots.

Outside in the hallway he turned a corner and found himself in the grand atrium, stories high. The huge windows were boarded over. The stones were blackened and pitted. Still, as different as it was, he knew the way, even in the darkness.

He walked softly, making no sound. He could feel no trace of the Living Force here. He allowed his anger to build, let it rest inside his chest. He could pull it out when he needed it. The Emperor had taught him that.

The turbolifts had been shut down, so he had to climb the staircase that curved through one of the spires, all the way up to the Map Room. The walls were half-destroyed. The floor was uneven, with deep holes blasted out of the stone. Ferus looked

Jude Watson

into one and saw the floor of the atrium hundreds of meters below. Yet when he waved his hand over the sensor the holographic map of the galaxy sprang to life.

Anakin had sat in here for hours sometimes. They'd all known it, and they'd all left him alone. He had the ability to send whole systems spinning, memorize details of language, atmosphere, minerals, history, geography...and then send another system spinning, then another, then another and another and another...and keep all the facts in his head, and remember them.

He had been so gifted.

The Chosen One.

Ferus walked through the holographic maps, through curtains of information, schematics, words and images. Pale blue, red, gold, green...the whole galaxy whirled around his head. He walked through the display to the Bespín system. He accessed the planet with its gaseous atmosphere.

Facts appeared: language, geography, chemical properties. He touched the thick gas cloud with his finger. The message appeared.

No coordinates on asteroid. Tracer beacon installed on two ships. Three ships total. Will be on comm silence. Emergency beacon in boot. Will activate if needed.

And then the blinking coordinates of where Flame waited. He'd been right. She'd had one last trick up her sleeve. Knowing Vader would come here and see where she was. He erased the coordinates.

His worst fear—that somehow she had discovered the location of the asteroid, had passed it along—was unfounded. The meeting could proceed.

He shut down the system.

Vader hadn't been here yet. He'd beaten him here. Vader would have erased the message.

Ferus took the stairway back down to the main level, curving around the spire until he reached the main floor. He walked out

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into the grand hallway, his hand on his comlink, ready to send the message to Solace.

He felt him an instant before he saw him, striding down the center hall, as though the Temple was still standing as it had been, as if what surrounded him was still noble, still beautiful. His boots rang on the pitted, blackened stone. He walked as though he owned the Temple.

He thinks he does own it.

Vader saw him.

They stopped. From one end of the vast hallway, full of echoes of the past, they faced each other.

Chapter Fourteen

Solace lurked on the edges of the atmospheric storm. It was a good place to hide. Gravity shifts were tossing small asteroids about like stones from a child's hand. It wasn't nearly as bad as it would be once she flew into the center of the storm, but it kept things interesting while they waited. Ry-Gaul sat in the copilot seat. They'd left Ferus's ship at a planet in the Mid Rim. She hoped the Imperial forces were heading there now.

Things were coming to a close. She had joined Ferus reluctantly. After her colony on the surface of Coruscant had been raided, she'd felt no more purpose in her life. Ferus had offered her a cause, and that had been irresistible. After Order 66, she had vowed never to trust again. Yet Ferus had drawn her in. It had felt familiar to fall into this group, heroes in her mind, Dex Jettster, Curran, Keets, Oryon, and of course Trever. Not so much participating—she wasn't much of a talker—as simply being.

Now their objective had been reached. They had a hand in the beginning of a rebellion. Solace felt sure that Ferus would have a new challenge after this one.

Ferus. She was worried about him, and she didn't like to worry about anyone. Ferus had lost something. His work as a

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double agent had compromised him. Both she and Ry-Gaul could feel it. She hoped he would find his way back again.

The emergency channel flashed. Solace leaned forward, her heart racing, and accessed the comm unit. It was Toma.

“Ferus got a message out. He gave the all clear. You can bring in the resistance leaders. Stormtracker says the storm will increase in intensity in a few hours. Enough to break up a ship. Come immediately.”

“Copy that,” Solace said. “Leaving now.”

She walked back to the stateroom, crowded with the passengers. They looked up expectantly, their expressions calm. They’d been through plenty already. They knew how to wait.

“We got the all clear. I’m flying into the storm. Things are going to get rough,” she said. “Use the harnesses to strap yourselves into the chairs. You’ll need them, I guarantee you. But don’t worry. We’ll get through. Unless we go into complete systems failure. But that’s a pretty remote possibility.”

She saw some of them pale. One of the leaders strapped his harness tighter.

Solace went back to the cockpit to study the stormtracker map. She was glad she was flying Flame’s ship. It was fast and agile, yet solidly constructed.

Although the gravity shifts and massive asteroid showers made for seeming chaos, it was helpful to note patterns before going in. In the most intense parts of the storm, it was hard to have even an instant to check a navigational aid.

“So I heard what you said,” Ry-Gaul. “You mentioned systems failure.”

She shrugged. “I said chances are it won’t happen. But the ship is about to meet some powerful forces. I was trying to reassure them about their options.”

“That was your idea of reassurance?”

She magnified the stormtracker so it would be easier to check during the journey.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Jude Watson

The storm always began with sudden air pockets and increased meteor activity. This was when pilots would rethink their idea of shaving off some mileage by flying through part of the storm. This is when they resigned themselves to a new flight plan and a delayed arrival to wherever they were going.

Solace set a course for the heart of the storm.

The air pockets turned deep and wicked. It was inevitable that the ship would hit them; they were impossible to avoid. They sucked the wind from you and slammed you against the seat.

The gravity shifts almost tore the controls from her hands. She could avoid the biggest asteroids but occasionally one would pass close enough to knock the ship off course. She was hanging on to the controls now, her hands clenched into position, her eyes straining to see every detail in the vast swirling grayness.

“Asteroid, port side!” Ry-Gaul said, his voice tight. She evaded it by meters.

She threaded her way through an asteroid field and dropped into an air pocket so terrifyingly deep she actually heard shouts of fear from the lounge. She zoomed out of the pocket and went into a screaming dive to avoid another one. Tiny asteroids peppered the shields of the ship. The controls shuddered under her hands.

The storm was worsening. Solace fought to keep the ship steady. Auroras shimmered ahead, deep purple and orange. Their glow lit up the cockpit.

She was drenched in sweat and casting an uneasy eye at the systems controls when Ry-Gaul said, “The asteroid is just ahead.”

She took a chance and pushed to maximum speed. She outran a rocketing asteroid and zoomed toward a satellite of rock so large it had its own atmosphere.

Immediately, the ship smoothed out...slightly. The ride was still bumpy, but she felt in control.

She landed near the small cluster of duraplastoid survival domes that comprised the base. Toma and Raina emerged from

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one of the shelters and came toward her. Lune came running, followed by a slower Garen Muln. Oryon brought up the rear.

The resistance leaders filed out on shaky legs, gazing up at the odd yellow sky, the air currents whipping around fully visible.

“Welcome to our base,” Toma said. “Let the first Moonstrike meeting begin.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ferus saw the glow of Vader's lightsaber as he activated his own.

This was it, then. The final confrontation.

He was ready. His rage was ice and fire.

He charged.

His first blow was easily parried. He came at Vader again. Again. Circling, jumping, vaulting past him, turning. Each time his lightsaber came toward him, it was either deflected in a shock that ran up his arm, or...Vader simply wasn't there.

"If you cannot even touch me, how can you win?" Darth Vader asked.

Ferus focused on his anger. He remembered Palpatine's words.

There is no limit to what you can do.

He charged at the dark figure again. This time his strike came close. He touched the edge of Vader's cape. He smelled the singed material.

Now, while he's off balance. Now.

"Maybe I'll just get lucky," Ferus said. "*Anakin.*"

Vader came at him with surprising swiftness, but Ferus was able to Force-leap away. Still he sensed that Vader was holding himself back, playing with him for now.

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“So you know who I was,” Vader said. “Do you think that would make a difference to me? Anakin Skywalker is dead.”

“Was it because the Council wouldn’t let you become a Master? You always had to struggle with your ego, didn’t you?”

“It was never a struggle. I was always the best.”

“‘Best’ is not a Jedi concept.”

“That is the trouble with the Jedi.”

Ferus wasn’t tired yet, but he knew he was expending too much energy. He was tapping into his anger and fighting better than he ever had, but it wasn’t enough. He had to unsettle Vader. He had to find the key.

He had everything he needed to defeat him, didn’t he? He had the Sith Holocron for strength, Vader’s true identity in his hand, his own rage. With those tools, he could do it. The Emperor had told him he could. Ferus thought quickly. He wanted to pick the battleground. Someplace that would unsettle the former Jedi.

There—the stairway to the Jedi High Council spire. Ferus started to climb. He knew Vader would follow.

He came out into the circular room. It was half rubble, the seating blackened lumps, the vast transparisteel shattered. Wind whipped through the room.

The Dark Lord entered. The wind blew back his cape. He stood, legs apart, ready for battle. Looking forward to it, Ferus was sure.

“The Emperor cannot protect you now,” Vader said.

What next? What could Ferus do to get him off balance? He suddenly had a flash of intuition. He remembered what Keets had told him.

“What about Senator Amidala?” he asked, leaping away from Vader. He faced him, his lightsaber held in an offensive position. “What about Padmé? What happened on Mustafar?”

He felt the quake in Vader. He had reached him at last.

“Do not mention her name!”

“I thought it was a lie, that the Jedi killed her,” Ferus suddenly understood, the Sith Holocron burning under his tunic. “It

Jude Watson

wasn't. You killed her, didn't you? You killed the woman you loved."

Vader's wrath filled the room. Ferus could feel it. Instead of turning away from it, he *took* it. He filled himself with it.

This is what the Emperor meant. This is the last step.

He flew across the room and this time he landed a blow.

Vader roared. It was a howl of fury, inarticulate, undisciplined. Totally unlike his usual icy control. The control box on his chest started to smoke.

Stones in the floor ripped out and were flung toward Ferus. He dodged them, rolling and twisting away. A blackened piece of furniture flew across the chamber and smashed into the wall over his head.

Anything that could be torn from the floor or walls came at him—conduits, debris, hunks of stone. He dodged and weaved, attacking and retreating as Vader hit him with everything he had.

"How did you kill her, Anakin? Did you lose control? Did you see her die, Anakin? Is that why you wanted Zan Arbor to perfect that drug? Was it for you, Anakin? So you could forget her? So you could forget *your wife*?"

Another roar from Vader. Part of the ceiling gave way. Durasteel melted, smoke rose from the debris. Ferus leaped over a gaping hole in the floor and attacked Vader again, but his lightsaber cut through empty air.

The anger inside Ferus was now like liquid fuel inside him. He was feeding off Vader's rage, he was pushing every molecule of his body and feeling every molecule of the room respond to him. Everything was clear, hard-edged. His body obeyed him without any hesitation, and his mind was focused. He had no doubt that he could defeat Vader. No doubt.

And *that* was what the dark side brought him.

When he won, when he defeated him, he could take the victory to the Emperor, and he could be greater than Darth Vader, more powerful than even the Chosen One had been.

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He charged at Vader and made contact. Vader waited a beat too long to deflect him. The blow shuddered off his body armor. Something inside fused and the plastoid melted. Ferus could smell burning circuits. At the same time, he detected a tremor in Vader's arm.

Suddenly he was picked up and slammed against the wall. He fought to hold onto his consciousness.

"Don't...get...cocky," Vader said.

Ferus rolled away from the blow that followed, barely escaping. He looked up. For a moment Vader was just a shape at the side of the room. For a moment, a trick of the eye or the light, he saw the room as it had been. The seats were restored, the air traffic outside flashing, the potent energy of the Force filling the room because the Jedi Masters were still alive.

Ferus felt it invade him, the sense of peace and light.

No, push it away! Listen to us! You could have been a great Jedi Knight, and they let you go! They never appreciated you!

It was true, wasn't it? Ferus saw himself as a Padawan, standing before the Masters. Taking responsibility for something that wasn't his fault. Tru's lightsaber. He had fixed it secretly....

He remembered that day. He remembered the compassion in that room.

Another vision came to him, of himself as a Padawan, accepting responsibility for what he had done. The Jedi Masters sorrowful, showing him the two paths he could take. He could have stayed. He chose to go.

His choice.

The room returned to its ruined state. He was crouching, breathing hard.

Connect.

The Force was still here in the ancient stones. The stories of all the Jedi who had lived and died here, they were here, too. His story was here. Not as distinguished as most, shorter than many, but his. He had followed the path for as long as he could, as well as he could, and the Masters had never asked for more than that.

Jude Watson

He felt the wisdom of the Masters inside him, and he gripped that feeling with his hands and let it fill his heart. He rose. He had no doubt that they had reached out and touched him. Many hands on his shoulder, showing him. Here is one way. Here is another. Choose.

He had come so close.

He walked out of the dark side and into the light.

I am a Jedi.

Now he knew with absolute certainty that he had to be rid of the Sith Holocron. It had been slowly poisoning him. He had been a fool to think he could take what he wanted and not be corrupted. He had fallen into the Emperor's trap. Almost.

He Force-leaped over Vader, surprising him, and let himself fall into the hole in the floor. He heard Vader's chuckle.

"Run like the coward you are!"

The wind whistled past his ears as he fell. He landed safely in the Map Room. He headed for the stairs.

He took each turning at top speed, Force-leaping most of the way. He knew where to go. The heart of the building, the power core. No longer operational, it would still contain enough residual energy, if not to destroy the Sith Holocron, then to damage it. He ran through the hallways and found the central conduit that ran, he knew, straight down to the power core. He reached into his tunic.

You are throwing away your only chance at success.

This is not the kind of success I want.

The voices of darkness were a clamor inside him as he held the Sith Holocron. He threw it in. He felt something rip inside him. It was an agonizing pain that sent him down on his knees. He breathed through it, calling on the Force to help him.

He felt it lift. He was exhausted, but he was free. He was himself again.

Vader came out of nowhere, raising a gloved hand. Ferus felt himself lifted up, over Vader's head. He couldn't breathe.

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“You should know before you die that your dream is dead,” Vader said. “Don’t you know I can bow *anyone* to my will?”

Ferus was slammed against the wall. He felt himself losing consciousness.

He was glad, in the end, that he would die here at the Temple. With the ghosts of his friends, his mentors, his fellow Jedi. He would become one with the Force in the place he first discovered and nourished it.

Chapter Sixteen

All in all it wasn't a bad start, Raina observed. The resistance leaders hadn't yet acquired the kinds of layers of protocol that bogged down the leaders of planets. They actually listened to each other. They could get things done.

The Roshans and the Samaritans were talking about sharing technology that might result in a super droid that could take on Imperial weapons technology. The leader from Naboo had a suggestion about how to sway politicians to join them. They all soberly discussed Tobin Gantor's report, delivered by Oryon, which stated that the Empire might be working on a super weapon. The discussions were fast and lively. Raina suddenly felt that Moonstrike might work after all.

Toma had told her to stay and act as a kind of moderator in order to control disputes. But she was in a funny position here. She was part of the resistance, but she didn't represent her homeworld. The others had discussed Flame—or Eve Yarrow—at the beginning of the meeting. Raina felt ashamed, even though she'd had nothing to do with Flame's betrayal. Flame came from Acherin.

She walked out onto the rocky ground. Overhead, the sky was darkening. Toma had said the storm was intensifying. When that

happened, it would often be so dark on the asteroid that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

She could see the shadow of Toma through the plastoid of the communications dome. She went toward it. The wind was picking up, and she couldn't hear the sound of her own footsteps. She thought ahead to the evening meal. She had hoped to set up glow-lamps to eat outside but with this wind it would be impossible.

She stopped in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light. Toma was bent over the console. She walked closer. He didn't turn, intent on his job.

At first she couldn't make sense of what she was seeing. But she'd been a top-ranked pilot on Acherin, and she knew how a homing beacon worked.

"What are you doing?"

Her voice startled him. He turned, surprise on his face. Surprise and unease. "Raina! I thought I told you to stay in the conference dome."

"Answer my question." Disquiet ticked inside her. "That's a homing beacon."

"It's for Ferus. You know he can't find us without it."

"That's not our coded channel."

"Raina..."

"Toma, what's going on?"

He said nothing.

Her voice was a whisper of disbelief. "Are you...a traitor?"

"No," he said fiercely. "How can I be a traitor to something that doesn't exist?" He leaned forward, spitting out the words. "What are we doing here, Raina? What did we commit to? A dream from a man who had once been a Jedi as a boy. He left us here for months to babysit his dream."

"We *offered*."

"He should never have accepted our offer. He knew what it would mean. While he was chasing nonexistent Jedi, I almost died here!"

Jude Watson

“That was the risk you took when you pledged your support to him! He couldn’t have predicted your illness. He brought more supplies as soon as he could.”

“And what did I get in return? The Empire has won, Raina, and we have to accept it. It’s the only way we’ll get our homeworld back. It is torn apart by civil war.”

“And the Empire is allowing it to die!”

“It’s our fault! The Acherins are fighting each other now. They’ll destroy Acherin—there will be nothing left if we don’t act now. They need a leader, someone who will restore the government and take the reins. Someone who will have the backing he needs to institute reforms, fix the infrastructure.”

She fell back against the table. “By the light of the ancients, I don’t believe it. They’ve offered you the chance to rule Acherin, and you betrayed us for it.”

“Come with me,” Toma urged. “We can return to Acherin together. We are old friends, Raina. The best of friends. We fought side by side. Together we can save our homeworld. Eve Yarrow will return as well, and with her we can do anything.”

“Turn off that homing beacon, Toma.”

“No, you don’t understand—”

“No,” she said, drawing her blaster. “*You* don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t kill me.”

“I will do anything to protect this base.”

She had made a mistake, she saw, when he half-turned. She’d thought he was unarmed. He had a blaster up his sleeve.

The bolt hit her in the heart. She fired, and he staggered and fell.

Raina’s legs wouldn’t work properly. She was telling them to move, and they were failing her. She tried to reach the homing beacon but everything was so dark. She stumbled forward, felt herself falling, but it was like falling into a cloud. She felt nothing now.

When she hit the hard ground it was as though she had jumped into her childhood bed on Acherin, the one piled with

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her mother's quilts, where she had played at night in the close darkness, pretending to be a pilot, pretending to be a queen, waiting impatiently to grow up and do something—anything—that would prove her courage.

Chapter Seventeen

Outside the Temple, Trever sent out the distress call, and they all responded. Keets, Curran, Clive and Astri, who had just landed on Coruscant, and even Malory Lands. All they had to hear was that Ferus was in trouble, and they were there.

They found Ferus in the great hallway.

They gathered around him. Trever sank to his knees. His disbelief and his grief burned his chest. “No,” he cried.

Astri knelt by Ferus and touched his hair gently. She dropped her head in her hands.

“Wait.” Malory hovered over Ferus, taking his vitals. “He’s not dead. Not yet, anyway.” She went to work with her diagnostic tools. “He needs a bacta bath, but I’ll have to treat him here, for now.”

Trever stepped back as Malory prepared her medications. She worked over Ferus for long minutes while they waited.

Finally they heard him groan.

Malory leaned back. “He’s coming around. Don’t try to talk, Ferus.”

“Vader...”

“He’s gone.”

Ferus tried to sit. Malory pushed him down. “Don’t move.”

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"He's on his way there...to the asteroid. He said he could get to anyone."

"He's confused," Malory said.

"No, he's not," Trever said as he bent down and looked into Ferus's eyes. "He's himself again. What is it, Ferus?"

"Warn them..." Ferus sat up. "Tell them not to go."

Trever shook his head, his eyes wide. "They are there already."

"I have to get there."

"You can't go anywhere! You need complete bacta immersion." Malory tried to gently push him down again, but with a surprising show of strength, Ferus stopped her hand.

"What is it?" Trever asked.

Ferus looked at Clive and Astri. "Vader said something about awakening a mole. Remember? But Flame...was an active agent from the beginning. He always has backup, remember? Someone on the base has betrayed us. I'm the only one who can stop him. I need the Force to stop him."

"But..." Trever said.

"Don't worry," Ferus told him. "I have it back again."

Trever was worried about Ferus. His face was drawn and white, and he looked like he was about to keel over. He had insisted on taking over the pilot seat as soon as the ship neared the asteroid. Luckily the fast-moving storm had moved close to the Core, and they were able to reach it quickly.

"Keep trying to get Solace and Ry-Gaul at the base," Ferus said. He kept consulting the stormtracker. "I don't like the looks of this," he muttered.

"The storm's interfering with the comm system, that's for sure," Trever said. "Wait—I'm getting some breaks here. I think I've got an open line!"

A holo-image of Ry-Gaul appeared. "I'm here. The meeting is going well."

Jude Watson

“Ry-Gaul, we have a problem,” Ferus said quickly. “There’s a mole at the base. Someone. And Vader is on his way. You must evacuate everyone. Do you copy?”

“Copy that. The storm is growing—I don’t know if—”

The image fractured into particles of light.

“At least he heard you,” Trever said. “They’ll be able to get out before Vader arrives.”

“I hope so.” Ferus leaned back and closed his eyes. His skin was white against his dark hair. “I hope so.”

Ry-Gaul, Garen, and Solace bent over Raina and Toma. They had both fallen millimeters from each other.

“Toma fired first,” Solace said.

Ry-Gaul turned off the channel on the homing device. “Toma was the mole.”

“I can’t imagine why he turned,” Garen said. “I never suspected him. Not for a moment.”

Ry-Gaul shook his head. “There’s no telling how close Vader is.”

“We’d better rally the others,” Solace said. “There’s no time to waste.”

“We’ll need to destroy the equipment before we evacuate,” Ry-Gaul said. “There might be data on the computers that could help the Empire.”

Wil had come with them, anxious to help. “I’ll do the pre-flight check and get everything ready,” he said.

“I’ll get Lune,” Garen said.

Ry-Gaul began to set explosives in the dome. They would blow it when they were airborne. He looked out the plastoid viewport to Flame’s ship. Wil was doing the pre-flight check.

It was lucky the ship was still in shape to get them out of here. Get them out of here....

Vader never leaves anything to chance. He always has a backup.

Ry-Gaul raced out of the dome. He could see Wil behind the cockpit viewport, ready to start the engines.

“No!” he shouted.

He ran toward the ship at top speed.

The explosion hit him in the face, and he felt himself blown backward. He landed on the ground, looking at the burning ship. The cockpit had been completely destroyed. He tasted smoke and dust.

Solace came up and helped him to rise. They stood silent for a moment as grief filled their hearts.

“Wil Asani,” she said. “We lost one of the best.”

The resistance leaders ran out of the dome.

“What’s happening?” one of them shouted. The group stood well away from the heat of the burning ship.

Solace kicked the dirt with her boot. “Vader had no use of Flame anymore, so he rigged her ship. She would have blown herself up. Most likely the plan was for her to leave before the air attack.”

“We have no way off now.”

“We’ll have to make a stand here. We have some surface-to-air weaponry. We might be able to hold out until Ferus arrives.”

Ry-Gaul was staring up at the sky. “Do you remember the talk of the superweapon that Tobin Gantor was working on?”

“You think it can destroy an asteroid of this size?”

“I do.”

Solace swallowed. “If that’s true, we can’t tell them.”

“No. If it’s going to happen, it’s better that they not know.”

The flames were dying down on the ship. Solace looked over at it. “There’s no way that ship will ever be flown again.” She looked closer. “Ry-Gaul, look. The port side doesn’t have too much damage. Isn’t that where the escape pod is?”

“Let’s take a look.”

Ry-Gaul walked over with Solace. Garen joined them, leaning on the cane with the repulsorlift motor that Toma had made for him.

“The escape pod isn’t damaged,” Ry-Gaul said. He checked the instrumentation.

Jude Watson

“Looks like a miracle,” Garen said. “It’ll fly.”

“And there is only room for one,” Ry-Gaul said.

The three Jedi looked at each other. They said the same name at the same time.

“Lune.”

Chapter Eighteen

Trever looked at the stormtracker and gulped. The storm was the worst he'd ever seen, and that was saying something. He had gotten more used to flying in and out of the massive storm, but he'd never done it in this kind of intensity.

He looked over at Ferus, who was gathering himself, studying the stormtracker intently. His tunic was wet with perspiration.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Trever asked.

Ferus turned to him. His eyes held the light Trever remembered, like a beacon in a dark velvet night. "The Force will see us through," he said. "Try to raise the base one more time. I'd like to know what we're going to find before we go in."

Trever turned back to the comm unit. He tried again to reach Ry-Gaul or Solace. "It's out."

"Then we go in. Strap yourself in." Ferus activated his own harness.

He pushed the engines and drove straight into the storm. He went far faster than he usually did. He had reconnected to the Force at the Temple, and he felt stronger. His body was failing, but the Force would take him through. He had no doubt about that.

The ship shuddered as it was slammed by a vortex. It spun until Ferus regained control. Ferus dived as a huge asteroid shot

Jude Watson

by. It left a space-wake behind that buffeted the ship. Trever was nearly thrown out of his seat.

The severe magnetic shifts were creating vibrant auroras of light—beautiful to see but tricky to navigate as they obscured the small asteroids that barreled unpredictably through the storm.

“Asteroid field to starboard!” Trever rapped out. The ship lurched as Ferus corrected.

The ship suddenly shifted into a deep pocket and plummeted. Ferus felt the terrifying drop in his stomach but let the ship go, knowing that if he fought it, it could break up the vessel. When he felt the pocket ease, he brought the ship back slowly, turning with the vortex until he found a hole in the pressure and shot through it into bumpy space.

“Stars and planets, Ferus!” Trever’s face was white. “That was close.”

Ferus veered around a medium-sized asteroid. He hugged it for a short time, staying in its draft. It was large enough to leave a small gravitational pull that Ferus could use to steady the ship. The only trick was staying close without slamming into it. Its path was erratic, and it turned and lurched from side to side. Ferus didn’t look at the instrument panel. He reached out to the Force, letting it tell him what would happen before it happened.

“Ferus...”

“It’s all right, Trever. We can hug this for awhile, let it take us closer.”

“No. Ahead. I thought it was an asteroid. But it’s not.”

Ferus had to lean close and peer through the atmospheric haze. Through the shimmer of a purple aurora, he saw a dark shape.

“It’s an Imperial Star Destroyer,” he said. “It’s Vader.”

“A Star Destroyer? He’s in a Star Destroyer?” Trever’s voice went high and thin. “That is not good news. He could have hundreds of starfighters in that thing.”

“I doubt it. He’s probably running with a small crew. He won’t think he’ll need that much support. We can’t outrun him.

We just have to hope we can beat him there and evacuate the others.”

“We can’t outrun a Star Destroyer!”

“Don’t tell me we can’t, Trever. Just watch out for asteroids.”

Ferus kept in the draft of the asteroid. The good news was that even a Star Destroyer’s magnetic systems would be inoperable. He wouldn’t pick up Ferus’s ship on radar.

His only advantage, as Ferus saw it, was that he knew what the asteroid looked like. He’d been to the secret base enough times that he could pick out the asteroid from space. To someone else, it would look like any other. And he hoped Ry-Gaul had dismantled the homing beacon. Vader would have general coordinates, but he wouldn’t know the exact spot of the base.

The asteroid suddenly plummeted into a space pocket. Ferus had anticipated it a half-second before and had already compensated by zooming up, out of range of the gravitational pull. The ship was slammed and rocked back and forth but he held steady.

They were close. Far ahead, Ferus could see the telltale cloud around the asteroid base. He checked the position of the Star Destroyer. His only hope was that Vader would pass the asteroid by.

“There’s a ship on the radar,” Solace told Ry-Gaul in a low tone. “I got a clear view before it went out. It looks like a Star Destroyer.”

Ry-Gaul nodded. He crouched down next to Lune. “Are you ready?”

The boy shook his head. “I don’t want to leave you.”

Ry-Gaul put his hands on his shoulders. “You know you must, though, don’t you? Your mother needs you. The galaxy needs you, too. You must grow up and be safe.”

Lune nodded, his gray eyes intent on Ry-Gaul’s face.

Jude Watson

Garen crouched next to him. “Remember all I taught you. The Force will protect you.”

“Trust the Force, not your instruments, to get you through the storm,” Solace said. “Once you’re through, the nav computer will be operational. Find the closest spaceport and land. Find someone you can trust to help you get back to Coruscant.”

Lune never cried, but now his face was tight with the effort to hold in his tears. “It’s not right to leave your friends.”

“Yes, it is,” Garen said. “You are our hope, Lune. We are sending you off.”

“May the Force be with you,” Ry-Gaul said. “Remember what we taught you, and trust yourself.”

“Courage,” Solace told him. It was strange. Here, at the end, she had finally found words of reassurance. “We know you can do this.”

Lune entered the escape pod.

The Jedi stood together, shoulder to shoulder. Overhead the skies roiled with thick atmosphere, clouds colliding against clouds, but they knew the storm was lessening in intensity.

“We had a good journey in this life,” Ry-Gaul said. “I’m ready to join the Force.”

“The galaxy will find its balance again,” Garen said. “It won’t need us to do it.”

“I am happy to be standing here with you,” Solace said.

Everything had worked out so well, Darth Vader thought.

Ferus Olin was dead. Or close to it. Close enough to die slowly on the Temple floor, to suffer as *he* had suffered on Mustafar.

And now he was in the perfect position to test the first prototype of the superweapon by blasting Ferus’s dream—and the beginnings of a rebellion—into space dust.

He didn’t need the homing beacon. He had already locked on to the coordinates. He had pushed those scientists on Despayre to come up with a program to estimate size, weight, and

gravitational pull based on a homing beacon. He could target the asteroid without trouble.

And there it was ahead, spinning in a gaseous cloud.

“Set coordinates,” Vader told the crew.

“Set.”

“Lock on.”

“Locked.”

“Fire.”

Trever screamed.

The energy bolt had been huge. It had hit the asteroid dead center.

One minute it was there, spinning ahead of them. Then there was nothing but debris.

The blowback from the explosion was so huge that it hit the ship and knocked it backward. The ship bucked and rolled. Ferus fought to bring it under control, while his brain frantically tried to make sense of what his eyes had just seen.

The base was gone.

Somewhere he heard Trever keening. “No, no, no, no...”

Ry-Gaul.

Solace.

Garen.

Oryon.

Lune.

The leaders of the resistance on dozens of planets. He felt the loss of so many lives as a great pain inside him. The Living Force receded like a wave that knocked him off his feet.

Red lights flashed. Cockpit alarms sounded.

“We’re going into systems failure!” Trever yelled.

Ferus fought to save the ship. He reached out to the Force. He had to gain control because he had to follow Darth Vader. He had to follow him because he needed to be stopped, and Ferus had to find a way to do it.

It was as though Ry-Gaul spoke in his ear.

Jude Watson

"Look."

He looked. A small arc of light, too faint for a star, a trajectory of speed.

An escape pod.

"Lune," Ferus breathed.

He fought the dying ship. He eased it into a current that was somehow stable. It was like a gift handed to him by his friends.

The Star Destroyer sailed through the debris cloud, heading off to escape the storm.

He had a moment of calm to consider. Two choices.

Follow the escape pod.

Follow Vader.

His anger was one path. Hope was another.

He chose.

Chapter Nineteen

The sandstorm had been blowing for two weeks straight. The nights were freakishly cold, the mornings bitter. With no suns to bake it away, the cold had seeped into the hut. The sound of the sand peppering the walls and the howl of the wind could drive you mad if you were inclined that way.

Obi-Wan Kenobi knew that this storm, like all things, would pass soon enough. Until then, he lived with grit. Sand was in his food, in his bedding, in his hair.

Anakin had always hated sand. Now Obi-Wan knew why.

He didn't hear the knock over the sound of the wind, but he sensed a presence outside his door. Obi-Wan opened it a crack. Ferus stood, bearded now, the sand thick in his hair, his eyes almost shut by the dirt and sand caking his eyelids. Obi-Wan pulled him inside and shut the door.

He saw at once that Ferus couldn't speak. The Living Force was weak in him. Obi-Wan led him to the sleep couch and left him there. He hurried to get supplies.

He bathed Ferus's face in warm water, gently releasing the hardened sand. He kept going back and forth to the cistern for more water and rags. He checked him for wounds and administered bacta. It was obvious he'd been in a fight. There

Jude Watson

was a large contusion on his forehead, another at the back of his skull.

But that wasn't what had dimmed the Force in him.

Ferus looked at him. His eyes filled with tears. He closed his eyes and turned his face to the wall.

He slept for three days.

Ferus awoke at midnight on the third day. Obi-Wan heard him stirring and went down to the pantry, where a pot of stew had been waiting. He warmed it, then scooped it into a bowl made of thick pottery to keep its contents warm. He poured water from the cistern into a jug and brought it all upstairs on a small tray.

Ferus had risen to a sitting position. Obi-Wan placed the tray on his lap. Ferus shook his head.

"You made it to my doorstep," Obi-Wan said. "You must have wanted to live."

Ferus ate.

When the bowl and the jug were empty Obi-Wan removed them. He sat facing Ferus, waiting.

The words poured out. Vader. Twilight. Ry-Gaul, Garen, Solace—everyone he'd meant to save. Toma and betrayal. Flame. An asteroid the size of a planet disappearing before his eyes. How everything had turned to dust. How Obi-Wan had warned him, and he had ignored the warnings.

How it was all his fault.

"I know it's not the Jedi way to say that," Ferus said, the bitterness and defeat in his voice causing Obi-Wan pain. "But I *am* responsible. I *was* blind. I thought I could defeat Vader—that was driving me always, and that destructive impulse blinded me to things I should have known."

"You had a Sith Holocron working on you," Obi-Wan said. "There are not many Jedi who could resist those voices. The greatest of us have been brought down. But at the right moment you recognized it."

"I was too late."

"You saved Lune. You chose the right path. You followed the escape pod. You brought him back to Astri."

"You don't understand. That isn't enough to save me. I don't know how to go on. In the cave on Illum—I saw visions. I saw a fireball that consumed Garen. I should have known!"

"The visions were not of the future, but of your own fears."

"I saw Siri and she warned me. She said I hadn't lost my arrogance. That I only thought I'd changed!"

"Your own fears, again."

"But Obi-Wan." Ferus's voice was hoarse, his eyes haunted. "What I saw was *true*."

"These things didn't happen because of your failures, Ferus. They happened because *someone did them*. Darth Vader is responsible for those deaths. Not you. He is the one who fashioned the plan to kill. He is the one who blew up that asteroid."

Obi-Wan sat quietly with Ferus for long minutes. He remembered his own bitterness, his own shame and despair. *What had saved him? How could he save Ferus?*

"Forgiveness isn't a feeling," Obi-Wan said finally. "It's a decision you have to make for yourself every day. Every day, you will fight for a moment of peace."

"That is a journey I'm not inclined to take." Ferus leaned back, exhausted. "Everyone I love is dead."

"Not everyone."

Ferus thought of Trever. "No. Not everyone."

"One day you will have peace, Ferus," Obi-Wan said. "Until then I'll give you the only thing I can give you."

Ferus opened his eyes. Obi-Wan's gaze was gentle. Obi-Wan had made it through his own despair. He knew the way. "What is that?"

He had expected gentle wisdom, or maybe a Jedi lesson. Instead, Obi-Wan spoke in a brisk, practical voice.

"A job."

Chapter Twenty

Everything was ready for his departure. His ship was fueled and standing by at the hangar near the Orange District. Keets and Curran had come to say good-bye. Dex was with them, once again in his repulsorlift chair. He had lost weight during his illness and was half the size he used to be.

"Wherever you're going, go safe and be well, my friend," Dex said. He patted him on the back with all four arms.

"If you need us, we'll be there," Keets said.

"We're going a hundred levels down," Curran said. "We found a neighborhood like the Orange District."

"Except it's not orange," Keets said. "Never liked the color, anyway. We found a colony of Erased. They set up in an abandoned field of gigantic cisterns, the ones that used to supply water to Galactic City. They filled them up with water. It's like living on a water world. We're going to live on a house raft. Not bad."

"We won't forget them," Curran said. "Solace, Ry-Gaul, Oryon, Garen, Raina. Heroes all."

"We'll be ready to fight when the time comes," Keets said.

Dex leaned in to speak to Ferus for a moment. "Never believed in second-guessing, you know. You did your best, and that is always good enough. We'll see more losses than these

before we're through. They were all great heroes, but more will step up to take their places."

The Svivreni never said good-bye. With sorrow in his eyes, Curran gave the traditional farewell of his homeworld. "The journey begins, so go."

Curran, Keets, and Dex climbed back into their battered airspeeder. Ferus watched until the vehicle blended in with the space traffic and he could no longer distinguish it.

He turned away and began to walk. There was one more thing to do. And it was the hardest thing of all.

Trever sat waiting with Malory Lands. They had use of the clinic for twenty minutes only; Malory had arranged it.

Ferus's steps faltered. Out of all the things he had had to do over the past months, this seemed the most impossible.

He and Obi-Wan had discussed it. Trever had been with them from the beginning. He had heard that Vader was a Sith Lord. He knew the Emperor was a Sith. That knowledge could put him in great danger.

Ferus had a way to protect him.

Malory took him aside. "I've been working on the formula since you gave it to me. I can pinpoint Trever's memories pretty precisely."

"I want him to remember his parents. His childhood," Ferus said.

"He will. But..." Malory hesitated. "You understand, don't you, that if I wipe out the last year...he might not remember you? His memories will be spotty starting from the death of his father and brother. It will intersect with when he knew you and Roan."

It felt like a great pain was ripping him apart. To remove Roan from another memory felt like another death.

And he would lose Trever, too.

Ferus swallowed. "I know."

"I explained it all to Trever. He's waiting to talk to you."

Jude Watson

Ferus approached the boy. He sat next to him on the examining table.

“So I guess this is good-bye,” Trever said. “Maybe. You know, the worst part is that I won’t remember what a great hero I was. I never thought I could be a hero.”

“You’ll have your chance to be a hero again. And I’ll always remember you as one.”

“I was pretty full-moon awesome, it’s true.”

Malory came up behind them. “It’s time. The procedure will take at least twenty minutes, so...”

“I’ll wait at the hangar.”

Ferus and Trever slid off the table. Ferus turned to Trever and embraced him.

“I lied before.” Trever’s voice was muffled. “The worst part will be forgetting you.”

There had been times in the past days when Ferus had wondered if he still had a heart. Now he knew he did. He felt blinded by his pain.

“You are my best friend,” Ferus said. “That will never change.”

He stepped back. He looked at Trever, wanting to remember the affection in the boy’s gaze. Then he walked away. He opened the clinic door.

“Don’t forget me!” Trever called after him.

Ferus hesitated, then walked out, letting the door close softly behind him.

Vader stood with Lord Sidious in his Master’s private quarters above his office. His briefing had been short and satisfactory. Twilight had been a success. The resistance movement was dead. The preliminary test for the superweapon had proved that one day it would perform as they expected.

Ferus Olin was dead. Or gone. It hardly mattered.

He had done it all, everything his Master wanted, and more.

STAR WARS: Reckoning

"The success of the first stage of the superweapon pleases me," Lord Sidious said. "What does not please me is that you failed my test."

Vader was surprised. "I don't understand, Master. I annihilated the resistance. I destroyed Ferus Olin. He was not our ally. He was our enemy."

"Of course he was our enemy," Lord Sidious said. "And of course I meant for you to destroy him. That was not your test."

"My test..."

"You fought him with emotion. Just in the way you pressured Zan Arbor to come up with that memory agent. Yes, I know about that, how badly you wanted it. I had hoped for more from you, my apprentice. I expected you to leave Anakin Skywalker behind. By your actions you have shown me that Anakin is not dead. Until he is dead, Lord Vader cannot truly rise."

A rebuke instead of praise. Instead of a reward, a warning.

"You killed her. That was good—it brought you to me."

You killed her. That was good. Vader was shocked at the grief and anger that roiled through him at his Master's words. He could easily have struck his Master down.

Lord Sidious smiled. "You see?" he taunted.

His Master was right. Anakin wasn't dead. If Anakin were truly dead, he would not be feeling this despair.

"You must accept this—all steps are necessary when the outcome is this." Lord Sidious raised one arm and took in Coruscant glittering around them, the stars and planets burning above. "The galaxy is in our grasp," he rasped.

"I will eliminate Anakin, Master. And...her." He would bend his mind to it. He would banish Padmé without a drug. He would do it with his anger. With his will.

With all that he'd done, with all that was behind him, where else would he go, what else could he do, but this?

He bowed his obedience.

Jude Watson

His Master's pale gaze traveled beyond him to the dark night sky. "See that you do. Because until that day, no matter how useful you are to me, you will be a failure."

Astri and Clive arrived in the ship Dex had procured for them. "We arranged for a house on Bellazura," Astri told Ferus. "It's near the beach, so you can see the water. It has a garden. We have ID docs, and credits..." Her voice trailed off. "We'll raise him with Lune. He'll have a brother again. And parents...We'll take care of him."

"I know he'll have the best possible life," Ferus said.

"Even with me as a father?" Clive tried to joke.

"Well, except for that part," Ferus said.

Astri slung an arm around Clive. "He'll make a great father. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Malory is telling him that he was in an accident," Clive said. "That it wiped away parts of his memory, including the fact that we adopted him. She says that he won't remember us, but with constant contact he might associate us with good feelings in his past."

Ferus nodded.

A med airspeeder approached and landed. Trever climbed out, looking around as though he hadn't seen the hangar before. Malory looked across the hangar at Ferus and nodded. The experiment had been successful.

Ferus watched Trever cross the hangar. He felt his breath catch. Trever's walk was different. He'd forgotten that Trever had been a different person six months before. He'd been a street thief. Over his time with Ferus, Trever had lost that cockiness, that defensiveness. Now it was all there in his walk.

Get your hero's walk back, Trever.

Something was missing in Trever's eyes, too. All that sorrow. He didn't remember Garen, or Ry-Gaul, or Solace. He didn't remember seeing the asteroid blown up in front of his eyes. That was something, at least. Trever had been spared that memory.

STAR WARS: Reckoning

Trever's gaze passed over him as though he were a stranger.

Malory introduced him to Clive and Astri. Lune ran down the ramp of the ship and hurried toward Trever, shouting his name. Trever looked startled.

"Guess you're my new family," Trever said. "You don't look so bad."

"And this is Ferus Olin," Malory said. "He's from your homeworld."

Trever turned to him. "Good to meet you."

Ferus couldn't speak.

"Are we going to get this show on the road?" Trever asked. "I can't remember chunks of my old life, so I'm kinda anxious to start on the new one."

Ferus cleared his throat. "Good-bye."

"See you! Hey, whoa, is that our cruiser? Sweet!" Trever hurried toward Astri and Clive's ship. "C'mon, kid!" he called to Lune.

Lune hesitated before turning away. "May the Force be with you," he said to Ferus.

"May the Force be with you, Lune. You would have made a fine Jedi. Take care of Trever. Just don't let him know it."

Lune grinned and ran off.

"I'm not saying good-bye," Clive said. "I have a feeling I'll see you again. You have an annoying habit of popping up when I least expect it."

"You never know," Ferus said.

He embraced Astri, then Clive. Malory climbed into her cruiser. After administering the memory agent to Trever, she had destroyed it. It was too dangerous to keep active while the Empire controlled the galaxy.

He watched Malory's ship rise and join the space traffic. Astri's ship followed.

In his heart, he wished them long lives and as much peace as they could find.

He would never see them again.

Chapter Twenty-One

The grasslands of Alderaan were vast and beautiful. Ferus lived on the edge of the great wilderness that lay across the sea from Aldera. Close enough to the city, but not part of it.

Bail had found him a house nestled in a small valley. He had no close neighbors. His cover story was that he was a botanist, working on a great work on the grasses of Alderaan.

His real work was protecting Princess Leia.

He was here not as a bodyguard, but as a safeguard. Just as Obi-Wan watched over Luke from a distance, he would be here if Leia needed him. She would never know him, but he would always be there.

He would make sure that no danger came to her. The daughter of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala would always be safe.

Ferus stood outside the door of his small dwelling. The sun was on his face and the wind was in his hair, but he didn't feel them. Instead he felt only the memories of all the lives that had touched his, and the people that he'd loved. Trever lived in him, and Roan. The Jedi he had fought beside. The heroes he had known.

Obi-Wan had told him to trust that a rebellion would rise. It would take years, but it would come. Dex's words had comforted

him. In his mind, Ferus saw Garen, Solace, and Ry-Gaul, but he also saw new heroes behind them, stepping up to take their places.

Obi-Wan was right about forgiveness. Ferus could feel himself gain a little more each day. He had even forgiven Anakin, for hadn't he come close to the line that Anakin had crossed? Underneath his tunic was a red scar—a brand to remind him that he had touched the dark side of the Force.

Maybe that scar would remind him about the need for compassion. And one day he would be able to direct it toward himself.

Obi-Wan had shared some of Qui-Gon Jinn's words with him before he'd left Tatooine.

A Force connection is a gift we honor not only in our hearts, but in our choices.

"You made the choice to live," Obi-Wan had told him. "Now live with honor."

His gaze moved toward the city of Aldera. This was his new home. Ferus knew in his bones that he wouldn't leave this planet alive. These grasslands would hold his spirit one day.

Here he would live, until the day he joined the Force and joined his friends, and Roan, at last. Until then he would trade the life he'd had for this one. He would say good-bye to all the things he'd known.

The journey begins, he told himself. *So go.*

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.